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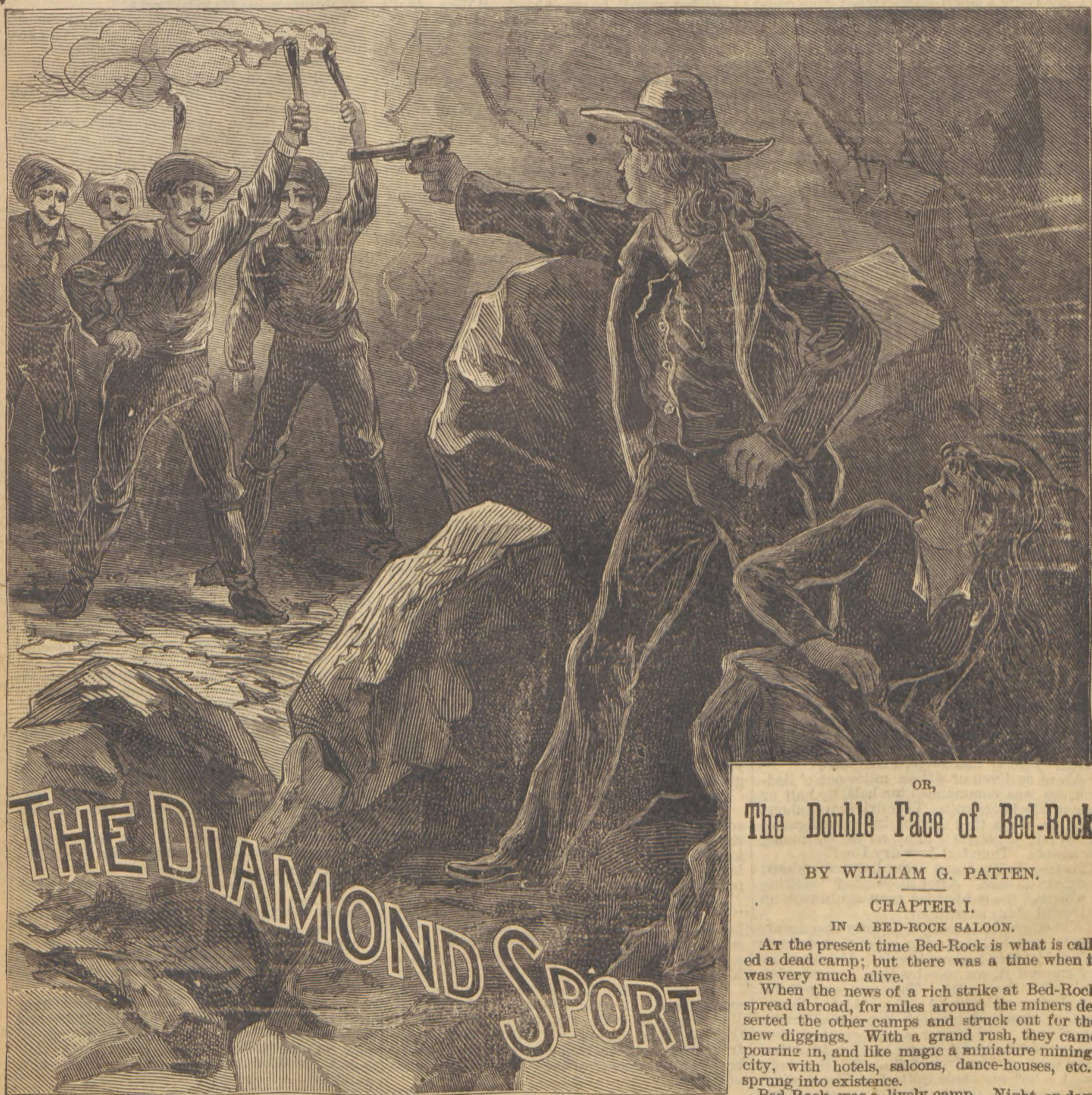
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THE DIAMOND SPORT

"WALK UP, GENTLEMEN; WALK UP, AND KEEP THE FUN GOING; THE DIAMOND SPORT IS ALWAYS AT HOME."

OR,

The Double Face of Bed-Rock.

BY WILLIAM G. PATTEN.

CHAPTER I.

IN A BED-ROCK SALOON.

At the present time Bed-Rock is what is called a dead camp; but there was a time when it was very much alive.

When the news of a rich strike at Bed-Rock spread abroad, for miles around the miners deserted the other camps and struck out for the new diggings. With a grand rush, they came pouring in, and like magic a miniature mining-city, with hotels, saloons, dance-houses, etc., sprung into existence.

Bed-Rock was a lively camp. Night or day, it made little difference, things were on the move there. All day long the miners toiled and

Mining Camp in Boom

seat; many of them spent the greater part of the night in wild revelry in one of the two saloons of the camp.

The most prominent saloon of Bed-Rock was one that displayed above its huge sliding-door a sign that read as follows:

"KENT'S PLEASURE PARLORS."

The time is evening. The big door of the "Pleasure Parlors" is thrown wide open, and a broad flare of light shines out into the street. A chorus of music and the sound of many voices can be heard within the barn-like structure.

Within, at one side is a long bar, over which there is a constant flow of all kinds of liquid concoctions. The musicians are mounted upon a platform at the rear end of the room, and the space immediately in front of them is thronged with dancers. The big red-shirted miner, who has paid for his dance and secured his partner, is "hoeing in" his level best, intent on getting his money's worth.

Through an open door a glimpse can be caught of another room, in which are monte-tables, faro-banks, and other gambling schemes. Within this room is an eager crowd, nearly all of whom are fiercely trying to "cut the tiger's claws."

Occasionally a small, dark-clothed man could be seen, sauntering carelessly through the throng. This was Cool Kent, the proprietor of the establishment. He was a man much below the medium height, but he was reputed to have steel-like nerves, to be a plumb-center shot, and "chain-lightning on the draw." He wore his black hair cut close to his head; his mustache was coal-black, as were his flashing eyes. Once or twice, since opening the "Pleasure Parlors," he had been forced to show his proficiency in quelling a disturbance or disposing of an "ugly miner." These jobs he performed with his little gold-mounted revolvers, and did them in a way that excited the admiration and respect of the spectators. Those who knew him cared nothing about "riling" him up.

Near the bar a small knot of men had gathered around a ragged, red-headed man, who was talking in excited tones.

"I tell ye what," he cried, slamming one dirty fist down upon the bar, "it war jist er rip-roarin' ole skirmish—er reg'lar high ole jamboree. Thunder! how dry I be!"

He abruptly closed his remarks, and began to "spit cotton" and wipe his lips with the back of his hand.

Some one took the hint, and ordered the drinks. When he had "liquored up," the red-headed man continued:

"Thar war six passengers aboard ther ole hearse, four inside an' two atop, along with ther driver. A parsonish lookin' galoot, a cross-eyed Jew, an' an ole man an' gal was the inside passengers. I wanted ter ride inside, but ther durned parson elevated his nose, an' simply refused ter hev me get in. I war mad enough ter chawed an ear off ther galoot, but rather than ter create er disturbance afore a lady I consented ter ride atop. Ther other outside passenger was er dandified-lookin' feller in patent-leathers, black velvet suit, with a big diamond in his shirt neck-tie, big white hat, an' kid gloves—*kid gloves!* What dy yer think o' that?"

A murmur of disgust came from the listeners.

"It are an actooal scandal'us fact," the red-headed man continued, speaking slowly and with great emphasis. "I made some remark about his style, which caused him to invite me ter dry up. Rather than create tr'uble, an' unnecessarily delay ther stage, I complied.

"About er dozen or fifteen miles out o' Bed-Rock, we war commanded ter halt, by half er dozen masked horsemen. Ther driver war about pullin' up, when ther durned kid-gloved galoot yanked out er couple o' guns, an' let fly among ther agents. Thunder! how dry I be!"

This time half a dozen eager listeners ordered the drinks at once. After thoroughly "wetting his whistle," the red-headed man again took up the thread of his narrative:

"Kid-Gloves hadn't mor'n let inter ther agents when he snatched ther whip out o' ther driver's han's an' let ther leaders hev it. Almost afore they knowed it, we war by ther agents an' er flyin' down ther gulch. They guv er yell an' started after us, er firin' right an' left. Somehow they managed ter sock it ter ther driver first thing. Kid-Gloves again grabbed ther reins, an' sung out fer me ter ketch hold o' ther driver ter keep him frum fallin' off. But, holy Moses! I hed *my* han's full! Kid-Gloves managed ter get ther driver down inter ther boot, an' hold him there with his feet. About this time sumbuddy inside ther hearse began pop-

pin' away, but I don't know what they war firin' at, an' I guess they didn't know themselves. Ther air war pritty ginerally full o' lead, an' you may bet er feller war in danger o' bein' safe fur erwhile. Ther road-agents chased us pritty nigh inter ther camp, but it war no go. Kid-Gloves played 'em fair an' square, an' we got erway.—Hello, there he comes, now!"

Sauntering leisurely through the throng was a man a trifle above medium height. The red-headed man had given a very accurate description of his clothes, but he had imparted no real idea of the man. He was a perfect Apollo, built from the ground up. His black velvet suit was cut to fit, and it displayed the perfection of his form excellently. His complexion was dark, and a heavy black mustache shaded a mouth that seemed ever to be curved in a careless, cynical smile. His eyes were dark and piercing—eyes that might beam with laughter or glare with fiercest anger. The curling mass of midnight hair that fell from beneath the white sombrero reached his shoulders. He was carelessly smoking a costly cigar as he sauntered aimlessly through the throng.

One of the crowd around the red-headed man started, as his eyes fell upon the dandified stranger.

"That man?" he exclaimed. "Why, *that's* Velvet Vane, the Diamond Sport, one of the most reckless devils that ever slung cold lead. He's a bad man from the word 'go,' and don't you forget it! If any of ye don't believe it, tread on his corns, and see him let himself loose."

"Thankee," said the red-headed man, dryly. "Sum day, when I hev er plenty o' leisure an' am b'ilin' over fer fun, I'll jist try 'im er whirl. Thunder! how dry I be!"

But, although he spit cotton profusely, no one seemed to take the hint this time. All eyes were centered upon the dandy Sport. Seldom was such an outfit seen in the rough mining country, and naturally it attracted much attention.

Seemingly unconscious of the batteries of eyes turned upon him, the Sport sauntered on, idly puffing at his cigar, and "taking in" all there was to be seen.

Suddenly a huge, red-shirted miner came staggering toward the Sport. He was considerably the worse for "ardent," and his blood-shot eyes were full of fight.

"Hello, Store-Clothes!" he roared, bringing a dirty paw heavily down on the dandy's shoulder; "when'd you crawl out—"

He did not continue. The open hand of Velvet Vane struck him fairly under the left ear, sending him reeling up against a man, ten feet away.

With a wild shout, the big rogue reached for a revolver, but the words of the Sport rung sharply through the room:

"Hands off! Pull a pop and you'll swallow lead! Easy now!"

The music and dancing stopped; there was a hasty scramble to get out of the line of danger, in which the red-headed man joined, wildly plunging under the table behind which the mar that sold the dance-tickets "held out."

For a few moments the infuriated bully gazed fiercely at the calm, smiling Vane. He was fairly trembling with rage, but dared not draw a weapon, for the revolver leveled at his brain was held by a hand that never trembled.

"D'yer know who I am?" he snarled, through his clinched teeth. "I'm ther rip-roarer o' ther Rockies—I'm Roarin' Bob, the Boss Bruiser. I'm hungry for gore. When I h'ist on steam, ye want ter clear ther track. Say, you dandy, giv' me haff er show an' I'll swaller ye."

Cool Kent came sauntering up.

"Easy, gents, with yer guns," he warned, in a soft voice. "I can't afford ter have you use them *here*. Apt ter damage ther furniture, you know. Sorry; would like ter accommodate you, but's impossible. If you are going to use your pops you'll have ter move out on the street."

"Durn ther shooters!" shouted Roarin' Bob. "Let me get at 'im with me jukes. I'll spile his dandy mug, cuss 'im! I'll knock 'im scend-an'-crooked, I will. He dassent stan' up an' let ther Boss Bruiser knock ther linin' out o' him, durn 'im fer er sneak!"

"Go fer 'im, Kid-Gloves!" came a voice from under the ticket seller's table. "I'll back ye. I'll bet on your head. Twenty ter one on Kid-Gloves! Who climbs it?" And, the danger from stray bullets seeming to be over, the red-headed man came crawling forth from his place of refuge.

"If the gentlemen wish to settle their little difficulty by a quiet little mill, I have no objections," added Kent, smilingly. He well

knew that a fair fist-fight would only be another attraction for the Pleasure Parlors.

"What's Dandy-Mug say? Durn 'im dassent!" cried Roarin' Bob.

"I desire no quarrel with the rough," replied the Sport.

"Ye dassent! Durn ye, ye dassent!" repeated the bully.

"I do not wish to participate in a disgraceful fight, as I am sure it would be," persisted the stranger.

"He takes water!" cried some one in the crowd.

A fierce glow leaped into the dandy's eyes. For a moment he glanced around in search of the speaker; then he turned toward the bully, saying:

"If I refuse to fight, I suppose every one here will consider me a coward. I desire no trouble with you, but it seems I cannot avoid it. Make ready for the circus, Robert!"

Chuckling with delight, the half-drunken bully made haste to do so. He was a man of terrific strength, and so anticipated an easy victory. In a few moments he was ready for the fray.

A ring was formed, and the antagonists faced each other in the center. The bully had stripped to the waist, while the Diamond Sport had simply thrown aside his velvet coat.

To an inexperienced eye the advantage would have seemed to be with Roarin' Bob, but a close observer would have hesitated to decide.

"Are ye ready?" growled the bully.

"All ready, Robert," was the quiet reply.

"Cl'ar ther track, then. Hayre cums ther boss bruiser er boomin'. Whoo-coop!"

The giant rushed upon his opponent. Straight as a cannon-ball, his huge fist shot out, aimed straight at the Sport's face. It was a terrific blow, but Vane played an old trick on the bully. Quick as lightning he ducked to the left. Hurling forward by the impetus of his own blow, Roarin' Bob tripped over Velvet's foot and went crashing to the floor.

"Whooray fer Kid-Gloves!" shouted the red-headed man. "All down; set 'em up t'other alley. Thunder! how dry I be!"

Hastily the bully scrambled to his feet. He was fearfully surprised at his unexpected downfall. He glared angrily at his smiling antagonist.

"Dodged, did ye?" he growled. "Mighty sharp trick that. Jist let me git er wipe at ye, an' I'll square that. Stan' up, now, fair an' square."

The bully had learned a lesson. He was more cautious. For a few minutes the men sparred cautiously. Suddenly Vane made a feint with his right, the rough threw up his hands to ward off the blow, when, like a flash, the hard knuckles of the dandy struck Roarin' Bob fair in the mouth. Making a wild grab at vacancy, the rough went over backward and measured his length on the floor.

A squeal of delight came from the red-headed man.

"Geelory to Gideon! 'Nuther drap, an' was-sent it er daisy! Brace up, Bobbie, an' try it ergin."

As soon as the half-stunned Goliath could regain his feet, he rushed to renew the attack. The heavy blow he had received had loosened some of his teeth and cut his lip badly. It had also knocked all coolness and judgment from his head. Without a word, he made another wild rush at his still smiling foe. Again the old trick was repeated. A dodge downward to the left, the dandy's right fist shot out, taking Roarin' Bob just above the belt, fairly in the pit of the stomach. The blow doubled him up like a jack-knife. He only had time to utter a wheezing gasp of rage, when he received a terrific blow, fairly on the temple. It hurled him senseless ten feet away.

Velvet Vane donned his coat, lit a cigar, and with a glance of disgust at the fallen rough, sauntered away.

The music struck up, the dancing was resumed, and things moved on as usual.

As he "sidled" up to the bar, the red-headed man murmured:

"How thunderin' dry I be!"

CHAPTER II.

A HASTY SHOT.

PEOPLE who claimed that they knew him, said that Velvet Vane belonged to that class who make the first rush for any promising new mining-strike. It was said that he followed the none too honorable occupation of a gambler.

The Diamond Sport—as he was commonly named—indeed, had the reputation of being a "bad man." When he gambled he usually

did so for pleasure, was always lucky, and used his money as freely as water. He never sought a quarrel; but it was a rash person who forced one upon him.

His advent in Bed-Rock, driving the mountain stage, with the dead driver lying in the boot, naturally created quite an excitement. He had escaped the inquisitive crowd, and taken refuge in the Pleasure Parlors. But there were those who knew him there.

Fifteen minutes after the fight between the stranger and Roarin' Bob, there was not a man in the dance room who had not listened to an account of the balking of the road-agents. The man Velvet Vane was fated to become notorious.

An admiring crowd of miners gathered around him wherever he went. Finally, he deserted the dance room and made his way into the gambling apartment.

Here he spent half-an-hour at faro. He seemed dissatisfied and disinterested in the game. He stopped somewhere near a hundred ahead, cashed his checks and wandered away to an unoccupied deal table, where he seated himself, to idly watch the people as they came and went. A few bore the flush of eager expectancy or triumph, more were wild-eyed with recklessness and despair. An airily dressed female occasionally flitted through the room, adding color to the scene.

Perhaps the Sport had been seated ten minutes, when a person came along and sat down at the opposite side of the table. The new-comer at once attracted his attention.

He seemed to be a mere boy, clad in a suit of brown woolen stuff, with not a weapon visible about him. His wide-brimmed hat was pulled low down over his face, but from beneath it there shone a pair of flashing eyes. The mouth was firm set, and surrounded by deep-cut lines. In fact it appeared as though his lips were tightly compressed over his hard-set teeth. His face was well-tanned by exposure to all kinds of weather.

Vane at once noticed that the youth was regarding him intently. He nodded in a familiar way, which the new-comer answered in like manner. There was a few minutes' silence, then the youth said:

"I know you."

The Sport smiled.

"Very likely," he replied. "Reckon I'm pretty extensively known west of the Mississippi."

The boy made an impatient gesture.

"To-day, you are called Velvet Vane, as I hear say, but once you were known as Reckless Robin."

For a moment it seemed as though the dandy was a bit surprised, if not confused; but the face that he turned toward the youth seemed as cool and unruffled as a summer sky.

"Reckless Robin, eh?" he murmured. "Stranger, you are ahead of me. I have sailed under a good many titles, but I don't remember the one just named."

The boy laughed scornfully. Although it had a hard ring, there was music in the laugh.

"Bah! Don't try that on me. I tell you I know you. You can't deceive me, and an attempt will be an effort wasted. Don't lie, partner!"

Quick as a flash, a revolver leaped from the Sport's pocket, and was thrust fairly against the youth's forehead. An angry fire blazed in the dark eyes, and his voice, although low, was threatening:

"Chain up, there! Don't carry this thing too far or there'll be blood shed! Hold your tongue, or you may have the pleasure of attending your own funeral. Do you hear?"

The boy displayed wonderful nerve. Although the revolver was pressed against his forehead and a finger touched the trigger, he never flinched. Instead, he gazed calmly at Vane and coolly replied:

"Hear?—certainly. You needn't raise your voice a bit on my account."

The dandy smiled grimly as he drew the weapon back a little, still keeping the lad covered. Despite his anger, he admired the boy's nerve.

"You're a cool one, my young pilgrim. Few men can boast that they ever called Velvet Vane a liar to his face and lived. Certainly your judgment is poor; but you will grow wiser as you grow older."

"Live and learn," is my motto, partner. No offense was intended, and I beg pardon. I hate to contradict any man, but circumstances forced me to be thus uncivil to you. I am not talking at random. When I say that I know you, I mean just what I say, and nothing less. That you were once known as Reckless Robin, I know."

The Sport laughed indifferently as he replaced the weapon he had drawn.

"I shall not dispute you. It would be a disgrace to quarrel with a boy. I shall not take the trouble to correct you, either, however wild you may shoot. Drive ahead. Who was this Reckless Robin?"

"He did not follow the profession of an honest miner, by any means, but he was a *white man*, for all that," replied the lad. "If fortune threw him among villainous companions, he nobly redeemed himself."

Vane had relaxed into an idle, wearied attitude. He seemed to take little interest in the affair, but noticing that the boy had ceased speaking, he said:

"Perhaps it would be well enough to introduce ourselves. I am Velvet Vane, sometimes called the Diamond Sport."

"And I am Ned Cole, outlaw-hunter and avenger," returned the boy.

A twinkle of merriment came into Vane's eyes, a smile wreathed his face, and finally he broke into a broad laugh. The lad's face flushed with anger.

"You may laugh," he cried, "but I speak the truth. I have registered a solemn vow before High Heaven to never rest till I see the man who has so bitterly wronged me lying dead at my feet."

"Hope you'll succeed," said the other, "providing, of course, that I am not the man you are after. That would be unpleasant—for me."

"I shall succeed—I will succeed!" the boy cried. "A just God will not permit such a wretch to escape punishment. I will track him down if it takes a lifetime to do it."

"But who is the unfortunate gentleman?"

"Dashing Dave, the outlaw."

Instantly the Sport straightened up, a serious look on his face. Something in the name had touched the right spot to interest him.

"Dashing Dave! You have sworn to hunt down that notorious villain? I am sorry, but I am afraid you have tackled a heavy job. He has a bad reputation—is said to be one of the most unscrupulous cut-throats in the wild West. You never can succeed without assistance."

"But I am going to have assistance. You will aid me!"

"I aid you?"

"Exactly! As long as Dashing Dave lives you are in danger. He has a grudge against you, and will kill you if he lives long enough. You must strike for your life, or he will throw you cold."

"There is logic in your words," laughed the Sport. "But, please tell me why Dashing Dave should wish to kill me. I am all adrift."

The boy leaned toward the Sport, and spoke rapidly, but in a low tone:

"Enough of this! It is time wasted. I told you that I knew you, and I meant what I said. Why should Dashing Dave wish to kill you? For the simple reason that Reckless Robin, his lieutenant, went back on him—betrayed him. Do you understand now? It's die Dave or die Robin! You probably have no great desire to shuffle off this mortal coil, therefore it is for your interest to lay over Dashing Dave if you can."

"And you really think that I am this wild, untamed Robin, ex-robber lieutenant?" questioned the Sport, in a bantering, half-mocking way.

"Think—no!" cried the boy, hotly. "I don't think anything about it. I know you are Reckless Robin. I know that Dashing Dave waylaid the stage to-day expressly to settle your hash, and, but for your prompt action, he would have succeeded. I have got the entire lay of the land."

"And who are you, that pretends to know so much? Where did you drop onto all this information?"

"I am simply Ned Cole. As for the information, the stars tell secrets sometimes."

It was the boy's turn to laugh now.

"My tenderfoot friend," the man in velvet said, slowly, "you are 'way off. You have been shooting at random, and haven't made a single bull's-eye. I am simply Velvet Vane, and nothing more. This robber lieutenant business is a pretty little story, but it don't fit. Certainly, if Dashing Dave has any feelings against me, all he needs do is simply to call on me. He will find me at home and the latch-string hanging out. But, as for you, I can't seem to find it in my line to join hands with you to hunt this outlaw down. Business will not allow."

"And so you refuse to aid me?" cried the boy, angrily.

"Sorry, but I shall be forced to. Would like to accommodate, but it is impossible."

"I am going to tell you one thing more," the boy said. "There are agents of Dashing Dave in Bed-Rock; ay, in this very saloon, who are sent here to kill you. You may be forced to join me yet. You had better have a care how you go, or they will get in their work on you."

"Not in a fair way. Velvet Vane is generally pretty wide awake."

"But they will not attempt to meet you fairly. Their game will be to take you unawares, and freeze you out. You must be on the alert every minute. You are a marked man!"

The Diamond Sport had been eagerly scanning what could be seen of the boy's face beneath the lop-brimmed hat. Suddenly he gave a start, and leaned quickly forward, exclaiming:

"Ha! I know you!"

The boy turned pale.

"I have penetrated your disguise—I know your secret," the Sport declared, in a low voice.

With a sharp cry, the boy snatched out a revolver and fired, almost in the very face of the unguarded Sport!

CHAPTER III.

A NICE DEAL—PERHAPS.

In an upper room of one of Bed-Rock's two hotels, two men sat, conversing in low tones. On the table between them burned a lamp, which, however, gave but a dim light.

One of these men was short and heavy, with a luxuriant growth of crisp, brown beard. He was flashily dressed, from the black beaver hat upon his head, to the shining boots upon his feet. His hands were white and shapely, with certain smooth, spaky movements of the long fingers. Strange hands they were for a man of such solid build. They did not seem to correspond at all with the rest of the man, but, indeed, seemed built more to handle the "Devil's Bible" than anything else. Next to his hands the eyes were the man's most noticeable features. They were sharp and piercing, seeming capable of reading one's very thoughts.

The other man was of a more slender build. His features were good, some would say handsome, but the long, black, pointed mustache and imperial lent an evil look to his whole face. He was dressed in a plain, dark suit.

Both men were smoking.

"Heath," the slim man was saying, "there's a heap of money in it. It can be worked like a charm. The girl is the most perfect counterpart of the heiress that can be conceived. At first she deceived me. I could hardly believe that she was not, indeed, Annie Dalton, or rather Annie Maines, the heiress. You well know that it took a good deal to convince me that I was mistaken. I am satisfied now that the real heiress must surely be dead."

"But it's risky," replied Heath. "What if the real heiress should turn up after we have won the game?"

"Then it will be run. You are used to taking risks, Heath. The prize is well worth the winning. Two hundred thousand dollars don't grow on every bush. A bold strike, well planned, secures the pot. You can't afford to lose this chance. Here is a fortune within our very grasp. All we need to do is close our fingers on it, and it's ours."

"It is a tempting show, Giles," said Heath, slowly, his eyes shining greedily. "As you say, two hundred thousand dollars in solid cash don't blossom on every bush. I have taken chances in my life, and if the coast appears clear, am ready to take a hand in this game."

"Correct!" cried Giles, triumphantly. "The cash is as good as in your pocket. I am sure Isabella can play her part like a charm. I have every confidence in her."

"Oh, yes! You'll find her about as sharp as they make them nowadays. She owes me a debt of gratitude that she will do anything to pay. Just give me the points of this affair, so that I may know about how the land lays."

"It's a short and simple story," Giles said, preparing to narrate. "It can be told in a few words. Have another cigar, Heath. Fire up. Now for the romance:

"Jason Dalton was a wealthy Eastern merchant. His wife died shortly after the birth of their only child, a girl. This baby-girl grew up to be a handsome and fascinating young lady. Scores of young men of the best stock in the city fell victims to her witching eyes, and paid her persistent court. There is a saying that 'love will go where it is sent,' and it may be that this was the way with Annie Dalton's affections. Anyway, she passed all her wealthy suitors by, and fell desperately in love with a poor book-keeper."

"Now it happened that her father had determined upon a certain young fellow of unknown birth, who was reported to be immensely wealthy. It was said that he owned a cattle-ranch in Texas and a paying silver-mine in some part of the West. How he managed to work himself into the good-will of the old merchant is a mystery, but he did it in some way, and nearly succeeded in securing the prize he sought.

"Finding that her father was determined to force her into an obnoxious marriage, Annie Dalton resolved on desperate measures. She laid the plot with her lover, and ere any one knew it they were quietly married.

"When the father learned of his daughter's secret marriage, he became terribly angry. Driving Annie out of the house, he forbade her or her husband ever seeking his hospitality. He acted with haste and repented at leisure.

"The young couple left the East and sought their fortune in the wide West. The first part of their wanderings can be easily traced, but as you advance, the trail grows more and more indistinct. However, it can be traced to where the young couple joined a wagon-train bound for some Western Territory. At that time, the danger from hostile Indians made an attempt to reach the mines a very uncertain affair. Many dangers beset the emigrants, and the chances were that they would be massacred by the savages. This fate seems to have befallen this particular train, and not one person was known to have escaped. All were left dead on the plain, food for coyotes and vultures. Thus ends the romance of the rich merchant's daughter.

"But now, the old man dies. In his last moments he repents of his harshness and makes a will, leaving his entire property to his daughter—providing she can be found. If she cannot, it is to be divided between various charitable institutions. A reward has been offered for evidence of the whereabouts of the heiress, and several detectives are at work on the case.

"By the merest chance I stumbled upon the trail of the heiress, and learned that the young couple joined the ill-fated wagon-train. By the merest chance, again, I came across the young lady who so much resembles the real heiress. The idea instantly took possession of me to substitute this young lady for the true heiress. There is money—a snug little sum—in the game. It can be worked like a charm. It happens that I was one of the many unsuccessful suitors for Annie Dalton's hand, and I know considerable of her surroundings and circumstances. My plan is this:

"I will marry Isabella Arnold, and she shall claim that she is the heiress. I can post her on all necessary points, and thus she can make the game a smooth success. Of course she will claim that her husband was murdered in the attack upon the wagon-train. I boldly rescued her from her savage captors and a fate worse than death. Out of pure gratitude, she married me first and learned to love me afterward.

"What do you think of it, Heath? Won't it work like a charm?"

The stout man laughed.

"You're a genius, Giles," he answered, "and I think it will work. At any rate, it is worth trying. But there is one thing, old man—you want to play a square game. I shall come in for my little pot, according to agreement, and if you attempt to play me foul, some one will run across a dead villain answering to your description."

Giles laughed at this threat.

"No danger of my attempting funny business; I know when my head is level. We should spoil the whole game if we became divided. It is for our interest to hang together."

"Yes; for if we don't hang together, we shall certainly hang separately."

And the two plotters laughed over that old pun as heartily as though it had just come upon the stage of action. A goodly pile of cash in prospect made them feel very good-natured, indeed.

"You think that the girl will enter into the plan willingly?" Giles asked.

"I know that she will," was the reply. "Isabella will do anything that I want her to. She is an excellent girl, partner, and will make you a splendid wife."

"That is a matter of indifference. It's not the woman, but the money I am after."

"But you will use her well?" cried Heath. "If you ever dare misuse her, it will be the worse for you. She nursed me through a heavy streak of mountain-fever; therefore I have the best of feeling for her."

"Oh, we'll get along well enough. I like the appearance of the girl. She is good style, and

evidently of good birth. That she is educated is apparent."

"Yes," added Heath, "she claims that her parents were high-class Southerners, who were beggared by the Civil War. She is a woman that many men would die for. You will have the satisfaction of knowing that you are not marrying into poor blood."

"It makes little difference. I would marry a Sioux squaw for the money there is at stake," Giles replied.

At this point, the sound of a half-smothered sneeze came from an adjoining room. With looks of alarm, the two men gazed inquiringly into each other's eyes.

"Curse the luck!" hissed Heath. "We have been eavesdropped!"

Giles seized the lamp and set it on the floor. Then he hastily dragged the table to the wall, and mounted it.

The partitions of the sleeping-rooms of the "hotel" were boards seven feet in height leaving the upper part open from room to room; hence, when upon the table, Giles could easily look over into the adjoining apartment.

It was dark and empty.

But through the open window, he could see a dark form, hastily climbing out upon the roof of a shed.

With a muttered imprecation, he drew a revolver and fired at the escaping eavesdropper. But the shot was a failure. A taunting laugh floated back through the open window, and the form disappeared, dropping lightly from the shed to the ground.

"Missed, curse it!" the unlucky villain cried. "After him, Heath! He must not escape!"

The two hastily dashed down the stairs, and out into the street. They at once hurried round to the shed.

All was dark and deserted there. No one was in sight. The eavesdropper had succeeded in getting away "scot-free."

"The jig's up!" growled Heath.

"Not by any means," answered Giles. "This is not the end of this affair. We will discover who that dare-devil spy was. Just let me find out and it will be good-by, Mr. Spy."

"The game is played," persisted Heath. "That was one of those cursed detectives, who you said were hunting this matter up. We are sold to the Injuns, and may as well cave in."

"Now don't be a fool, partner," protested Giles angrily. "There is too much in the pot to give this game up now. We don't know how much the spy heard. Perhaps he has no hold on us. Then again, if it was a detective, he can probably be bought off. The reward offered is for information of the whereabouts of the heiress. If a detective cannot obtain such information he cannot obtain the reward. Therefore a little money will buy him off, and he will allow us to pursue our game without molestation."

"You may be right," Heath admitted. "But I would give something if our plans had not been overheard."

"I thought you said the room adjoining yours was unoccupied?"

"And so I supposed it was. It is evident that I was deceived."

"I reckon we were a trifle indiscreet in forming our plans there, anyhow. There is some consolation in the fact that we shall know better next time."

"That's mighty poor consolation. Something like a cat losing her tail in a trap—she would know better than to do it again, but the joke would be that she wouldn't have another tail to lose. For my part, I feel a trifle blue over this affair."

"It will turn out well enough, I am convinced. Where shall we go, now?"

"To Kent's Parlors. Isabella sings there to-night. Besides, we may learn something about our spy."

"I don't see much of a show for that, but we will go over."

Five minutes later they entered the Pleasure Parlors.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MAN IN VELVET IS PUZZLED.

It looked as if the reckless boy had fired straight at the Sport's head, with the muzzle of the revolver almost touching his face.

Not so, however; he had fired over the Sport's shoulder.

The sharp report of the weapon was followed by a cry of pain and rage, and a rough-looking man, a few feet behind the Sport, began dancing around in an excited manner. As he grasped his right hand with his left, and rubbed it vigorously, he continued to dance and fill the air with his objurgations.

In the floor near by a knife was quivering where it had dropped, striking point first.

The lad had seen the man draw a knife and raise it behind the Sport's back. Quickly comprehending the danger, he had snatched his revolver, and fired. The bullet struck the knife, tearing it from the man's hand, and the blade fell to the floor, but the bullet glanced off and lodged in the wall a few feet away.

The shock to the hand and arm made the man half crazy with pain and added fury to his anger.

A crowd gathered at once, and began crying for an explanation, so jumping upon the deatable, the boy explained the affair.

Cries of indignation came from the crowd.

"Hang the wretch!" shouted some one.

The crowd took up the cry.

The baffled assassin was seized and dragged toward the door. His attempts to explain were ineffectual. His voice was drowned by the angry cries of the mob.

Before the man in velvet could interfere they had dragged the man through the dance room and out into the street.

The Sport followed close behind.

It seemed as though the would-be-assassin would get short shrift, but at this point there came a startling interruption.

A piercing whistle was heard. A moment later the sharp clatter of iron-shod hoofs came to the ears of the crowd. Then followed pistol-shots.

Down the street at a break-neck pace dashed a small band of horsemen, mounted on black horses. Each rider was dressed in black and wore a black mask over his face, a revolver in either hand, the bridle-reins of the horses lying loosely upon their necks. The masked horsemen were yelling and firing as they rode.

With wild cries, the crowd scattered, all seeking the nearest refuge.

Straight by the saloon the horsemen passed, and, as they passed several random shots were discharged at them. Only one took effect.

Calmly sighting along his handsome revolver, upon which the light from the window of the saloon fell, the Diamond Sport fired.

One of the horsemen threw up his arms, reeled wildly in the saddle, then sunk forward upon his horse's neck. A moment later the whole band disappeared down the street.

In the excitement, the man who had attempted to take Velvet Vane's life escaped. Whither he went, no one knew or cared. The appearance of the somber riders had driven everything else from the people's heads.

They swarmed back into the Pleasure Parlors, and gathered in knots to excitedly discuss the meaning of the wild ride. It really seemed to have been objectless—nothing but a wild, dare-devil freak of the road-agents.

But the reckless ride had not been objectless. It had a purpose, and that purpose had been accomplished.

The Sport made his way back into the "parlors," as they were called, among the wildly-talking and excited crowd, when the red-headed man espied him and came lurching up, with his homely, bearded face wrinkled and drawn into a look of agony.

"Do me eyes deceive me?" he cried, striking a tragic attitude, "or are it actually Kid-Gloves, an' no mistook? Partner—hic—put her thar."

With these words, he extended a grimy paw, which the Sport accepted, with a dubious smile.

Gravely working Vane's arm up and down, the red-headed man seized the Sport by the lapel of his coat, with his left hand, and said, confidentially:

"Partner, this are the dingdest dryest town I ever drapped inter. I'm dryer'n'er Cape Cod mackeriel."

Smiling, the Sport said:

"Yes, I understand. I can help you out."

"Kid-Gloves," urged the red-headed man, solemnly, "you'll surely go ter heving when yer die. As I sed, I must hev'er drink or perish, therefore I gratefully—hic—accept your offer."

They moved up to the bar, and the Sport ordered the barkeeper to let the red-headed man quench his thirst.

At this moment, a long, lank, black-clothed, solemn-faced man approached. The red-headed man instantly recognized him.

"Hullo!" he cried, "hayre's Parson Long-face, ther ole gospel-sharp as refused ter ride in ther same hearse with yours truly. Say, ole man—hic!—cum up an' hev'er drink."

The parson drew near, but shook his head.

"I never drink the devil's broth," he said in a deep, hollow voice. "Friend, you are on the direct road to the pit that burneth with fire and brimstone."

"Hey?" cried the red-headed man. "Then—hic! Parson—hic!—hev er swig?"

"N—no," decided the parson, hesitatingly, "I don't believe I will. I certainly do not rest very well nights, but I do not think I will touch Satan's drink to help even that. I ventured into this den of sin to see if I could not snatch some perishing soul from destruction."

"Parson," said the red-headed man, slowly, "just take er swaller—hic!—an' I will listen ter what you hev ter say. Don't be afraid, parson, ther—hic!—Sport are treatin'."

"If you will consent to listen to what I have to say, I will for a moment stoop to taste the vile liquid."

"Korrek, ole gospel! Jist h'ist on er glass, then fire ahead. I'll be all attention."

The parson accepted the glass, and, with an assumed look of scorn and repugnance, drained it. The liquor had a strange effect upon him. His long face seemed to grow less long; it even broadened out into a smile.

"Struck ther—hic!—right spot, by Jupiter!" cried the red-head. "I knowed it would. Say, parson—hic!—hev 'nuther sniffer? Don't be bashful. Jist h'ist on 'nuther sniffer, an' ye'll be able ter enjoy er good night's rest."

The parson consented, and drank again.

The Sport, an amused spectator of this little scene, now paid for the liquor and moved away.

A short time afterward he felt a touch on the arm and turned to see Ned Cole beside him. For a time he had entirely forgotten the lad, and now he said quickly:

"Hullo! I had forgotten you. Where have you been? Allow me to thank you for your opportune shot. It was put in at about the right point."

"Do you believe now that Dashing Dave is bound to kill you?" asked the boy. "That fellow was one of his agents. He is hot after you. Will you strike back?"

"Well, if he pushes this funny business too far, I shall be apt to," Vane replied. "Men do not usually submit quietly to be murdered. If he pushes me too far, I shall kick, you bet!"

"Right! Now the best thing you can do is to join hands with me against the outlaw. While one of his agents attempted to kill you to-night, I am satisfied that Dashing Dave himself was in this very building, deeply disguised. He had to do something when his tool fell into the trap that he did, so he called up his men, who were lying in wait a short distance away, and in the excitement the would-be assassin escaped."

"I believe you are right. I have been wondering what that reckless dash meant. You have explained it. I don't know but I shall have to use vigorous measures of defense. In fact, I believe I will join you against my old chief, for I am now convinced that you, indeed, know me."

"Good!" cried the boy. "Shake! We are pard!"

The two shook hands.

"You say you have penetrated my disguise—have learned my secret," said the lad. "I beg you keep it. As I am, I can better accomplish my purpose. See?"

"Certainly," assented the Sport. "You need not fear, your secret is safe with me," he added, softly. "I would be a miserable creature to reveal it. We are pard now, and will share each other's secrets."

For a few moments the boy gazed at the floor with downcast eyes. The Sport watched him closely. Without looking up, he finally said:

"I must go now, partner. I will see you in the morning and we will complete our plans. Good-night."

With another hand-shake, the two separated. The man in velvet watched the boy till he left the saloon, then he turned away with a half-sigh, and a strange feeling fluttering in his breast.

"It has been an almost hopeless search," he murmured, "but success has crowned my efforts at last. I took desperate chances once; I will do so again, if needs be. We are pard!"

A short time later he came upon the parson and the red-headed man. Locked arm-in-arm, this strange couple were sauntering around the room. Both appeared to be considerably the worse for liquor.

"Parshun," the red-headed man was saying, "sorry—hic!—but I's been er schinner all mer life. But—hic!—I'll r'form if yer wants me to, parshun. I alwaysh treats—"

"Friend," said the parson, whose tongue was also a little thick, "I was thinking that it was your turn. I'll take whisky, if you please."

"Scandal'us fact, parshun, but I'm—hic!—dead broke. Ain't got nary red. As I wash shaying—hic!—I alwaysh treats ther wishes ov

my friends with r'spect. If yer wants me to r'form, I'm—hic!—jist yer chickin."

In steering around through the crowd they ran against two men who were earnestly talking together. They were the plotters, Heath and Giles.

"Careful, you drunken louts!" cried Giles, sharply. "Keep your eyes open, so that you can see where you are going!"

"Scuse me!" said the red-headed man, stopping and leering up into the speaker's face. "Do you—hic!—own this shanty?"

Giles's face flushed with anger. "Blame your hide!" he cried, "I'll show you, if you don't hold your tongue and move along."

"Friend," interposed the parson, "hold thy temper. The passion of anger, much indulged in, causes Satan to rejoice. If I was in your place," he continued, soberly, "I'd go bag my head."

Evidently the liquor he had drank was getting the best of the parson's discretion. He was losing control of his tongue.

"Korrek, parshun!" echoed his companion; "he'd better—hic!—put his head to shak! Never see'd such er—hic!—funny-looking head's he's got. Look jes' 's though there wa—hic!—wash two of 'em, don't it, parshun?"

"The fellow is slinging on a little too much style," supplemented the parson. "Acts just as though he was going to get his fingers on some old codger's cash. Wish him joy if he is."

"Parshun," said the red-headed man, "I'm jist—hic!—thunderin' dry. Shet 'em up, will yer, parshun?"

"Hem! I'm er little dry myself," was the response. "Perhaps we'd better take a swallow," and with this, the strange chums staggered away toward the bar.

Behind them they left an angry man.

"Curse him!" cried Giles, "what did he mean?"

"What are you driving at?" asked Heath.

"What he said about some old codger's cash. Does the blamed fool know anything of our game?"

"He? No!" cried Heath. "That was only some of his drunken talk. How should he know?"

Giles shook his head.

"He couldn't have been the spy. But I would give something to know that his words were not an intentional shot. Ah! Isabella is going to sing, at last."

The sharp tinkle of a bell sounded through the room, and simultaneously Cool Kent appeared upon the musicians' stage at the back of the room. He made a motion commanding silence, and then said:

"Gentlemen, you will now have the pleasure of listening to the 'Western Song-Queen,' Mademoiselle Isabella."

He retired, and a moment later a bewitchingly handsome girl appeared upon the stage. She was attired in a short white dress, and there were flashing jewels upon her bare arms and at her throat. Her long dark hair floated in luxuriant masses around her shoulders. Her midnight eyes were alive with emotion, and the ripe red lips slightly parted.

When this vision of beauty appeared upon the stage, the Diamond Sport uttered a low cry of astonishment. He could hardly believe his eyes.

"Can it be?" he muttered. "No, no, it cannot! I am deceived! She would not appear thus, and in such a place. And still the resemblance is perfect. She is going to sing."

After the burst of applause which greeted her appearance had subsided, she began to sing. The song was a sad, sweet composition that touched the rough miners to the very heart. The handsome song-girl had a wonderfully sweet voice that thrilled every listener.

She retired, but was recalled and sung again. This time it was a dancing, airy song, and she kept time to the singing with the graceful motions of her perfect form.

At the close the crowd fairly cheered themselves hoarse. Time after time she was recalled, till at last she refused to appear.

"Heath," said Giles, his eyes shining with admiration, "she is a gem of the first water, and no mistake!"

"Correct you are!" was the reply. "I told you she was a prize, old man."

Velvet Vane was perplexed. "Who can she be? She cannot be—No, I am mistaken; I am slightly mixed. She would not appear there unless she were forced to, to secure bread. It may be—it may be—I will find out to-morrow, anyway. I fell in love with those eyes of hers, and rashly turned against the chief to rescue her from his clutches. I could

not be easily deceived. It may be—but—I don't know."

The Diamond Sport retired to rest that night, the most puzzled man in Bed-Rock Camp.

CHAPTER V.

AN ASTONISHING UNMASKING.

THE next issue of the *Bed-Rock Pioneer*, the wide-awake little weekly newspaper of the camp, contained the following:

"DASHING DAVE AGAIN!"

"HE ATTEMPTS TO STOP THE BONANZA STAGE!"

"BUT IS FOILED."

"Last Tuesday a desperate attempt was made to rob the mail stage from Bonanza Camp, bound for Bed-Rock. A band of masked horsemen blockaded the trail, some ten or twelve miles out, and ordered the driver to halt. Every one who knew that unfortunate man is well aware that he was no coward. He immediately laid the whip to his horses, and attempted to dash through the lines of the road-agents. It was a daring act, and the driver paid dearly for it. When the road-agents saw how the thing was moving, they immediately began firing on the stage. It seems that the driver was struck by almost the first shot, but he held out until his daring attempt was a success. He saw the stage burst through the line of outlaws, then he sunk lifeless in the boot."

"It happened that beside the driver there was an equally daring spirit, a gentleman known in these parts as Velvet Vane. He immediately seized the reins, and soon gained control of the frantic, terrified horses. With commendable skill he handled the ribbons, and although the robbers pursued them several miles, they escaped at last."

"It is supposed that this attempt at stage-tolling was made by that old offender, Dashing Dave. This unscrupulous outlaw is well known in these parts. He leaves his name written in blood wherever he goes. The 'Private Vigilance Committee,' organized by one of our prominent citizens, Colonel Allen, offer the following

"REWARD!"

"\$500 reward is offered for the capture of the notorious outlaw and desperado, Dashing Dave. The reward will be promptly paid over upon his apprehension, *dead or alive*."

"(Signed) COLONEL CHAS. ALLEN,
Per Allen's Private Vigilance Com."

The Diamond Sport was highly amused as he perused this account of the attempted stage-robbery. The account, in fact, differed widely from the real facts of the case. The newspaper man had succeeded in heaping the entire credit upon the driver, making him out a hero, indeed. When the road-agents ordered the halt, the driver had promptly responded by attempting to pull up. It was Vane's interference that had prevented this, and it was his skill and nerve that had carried them through the robbers' lines.

He laughed softly when he had finished reading the account.

"That is about as near as they usually hit," he muttered. "These paper-makers can't get a thing right if they try. They seem to be utter strangers to solid facts."

In another part of the paper was the following item:

"PERSONAL:—If the party who overheard the private conversation between two gentlemen in Room No. 1, Metcalf's Hotel, last Tuesday evening, will come to the same room next Saturday at 1 o'clock P. M., he will hear something to his advantage. There is money in it. S. H."

In the paper there was also a brief account of the reckless night-ride of the somber horsemen through the very midst of the camp.

Simon Heath sat in Room No. 1 patiently and hopefully waiting the appearance of the eaves-dropper.

"I don't believe he'll come," he muttered, as he lit a fresh cigar. "I think it was a foolish piece of business, that tucking an item into the *Pioneer*. That was all Giles's work. Likely as anyway the fellow will never set eyes on one of the papers. We must find him out some way, or the game's a failure. It's a wild project, anyway."

"I don't half believe Giles intends to play a square game. There is something crooked about him, I know that. He intends to freeze me out in some way, but he will have to sharpen up if he gets ahead of Simon Heath. The girl is square, at any rate. If there was any way to do it, I should like to leave the scoundrel in the lurch, and play the game out myself, with Isabella's assistance: but I don't suppose it could be done. We shall have to hang together now."

He drew out his handsome gold watch and glanced at the face. It was time for the eaves-dropper to put in an appearance, if he was going to do so.

"He won't come—"

At this moment the door opened, and a rough-looking man stepped into the room. He was dressed like a common miner, with a huge slouch hat pulled down over his eyes. His face was hidden beneath a huge, bristling beard.

He nodded shortly to Heath, and then walked to a chair and sat down. He did not remove his hat or utter a word.

"Did you come in answer to the personal in the *Pioneer*?" asked Heath, coming at once to the point.

The man nodded.

"Very well. I suppose, then, that you are the person who unluckily overheard the conversation that occurred in this room last Tuesday evening?"

Another nod.

"I will not inquire how you came there at that time," went on Heath, wondering if the man could speak. "That is a matter of indifference as long as you were there and overheard the conversation. Allow me to ask you what you propose to do about it?"

"Do about it!" growled the stranger, in a hoarse voice, that was evidently disguised; "jest let me ax yer honorable self that aire question. What do you propose ter do about it?"

"Do you intend to use what you heard against us, or will you accept a reasonable sum and keep mum? That's business! Talk lively and straight now. I'm in something of a hurry."

"Is that so, now?" in an aggravating drawl.

"If ye'r in such er durned hurry I'll slide on. We can talk this matter over sum other day."

"No," cried Heath, angrily, "I want to settle this matter at once and get it off my mind. How much will shut your mouth? Speak quick!"

"Waal, I dunno, now," the stranger drawled, in a gruff, repulsive way. "Reckon ther secret's worth er good pile. Sum folks would bleed ye mighty hard."

"Come, come; none of this beating around the bush. Come to the point at once, and state how much will keep you still. We might as well come to an understanding at once, as to be all day about it."

"Exactly. You claim that ther real heiress are defunked, and you are goin' ter substitoot ernuther gal in her place. Are that ther way ther land lays?"

"It can make little difference to you about that. I am willing to pay you to keep mum as to what you heard. There is no money on the other side, for a reward is offered only for information of the whereabouts of the real heiress. You know nothing about her, and therefore could obtain no part of the reward. But if you will go quietly about your business and say nothing about what you heard, it will be money in your pocket."

"Solid hoss sense, partner," declared the stranger. "You talk like er school-marm. I kinder take ter yer style o' doin' business. How much will yer give me ter keep still?"

"A hundred dollars."

The stranger stared at Heath a moment in open-mouthed amazement, then laid back and burst into a roar of hoarse laughter.

Simon Heath colored with anger.

"What do you mean?" he cried. "What are you laughing at?"

As soon as he could stop, the stranger said:

"You don't mean it, partner? You can't mean it! Would you actually an' really give er whole hundred dollars fer me ter keep still? You can't mean it. Haw! haw!"

He burst out laughing again.

"That's my offer. Do you accept or not? Stop that cursed laughing and talk business. I haven't any time to fool away. Talk lively, now. Do you accept?"

"Waal, hardly!"

"You don't accept? Well, then, how much will it take to buy your silence?"

"Waal, partner, seein' as how it's you, I'll let you off easy. I don't want ter be hard nor nothin', an' so I'll set it sorter light. Ten thousand dollars 'll do me."

Heath uttered a fierce oath and sprung to his feet. He could hardly believe his ears.

"What!" he cried. "You thundering idiot! What do you take me for—a fool?"

"Now, don't get excited, an' go ter callin' names," the stranger said, calmly. "It's apt to create er coolness among ther best o' frien's. It don't pan out well in ther eend. When will yer hev ther money reddey?"

"Never, curse you!" cried Heath, and with a quick movement he reached forward, and suddenly tore the whole mass of false beard from the stranger's face.

A startling disclosure took place. This sum-

mary unmasking revealed the long, sanctimonious face of Parson Grimes!

The editor of the *Pioneer* was sitting in his office late one night, when the door opened, and a strange-looking man made his appearance.

The visitor was dressed from head to foot in black and wore a black mask over his face. Without displaying any weapons, he stepped fearlessly into the room.

Instantly the editor reached for a revolver, but the stranger made a warning gesture.

"Easy, boss," he said, calmly. "Don't try that. My men are just outside, and will rush in at the least suspicious sound. Pull a pop and the *Pioneer* will have to hunt up a new editor. I have come on a peaceful business errand, and it will be for your interest to treat me civilly."

"Who are you?" cried the editor.

"Dashing Dave, road-agent, etc.," replied the masked man, coolly.

"Happy to make your acquaintance," declared the editor, regaining his composure, in a measure. "Anything I can do for you? Do you wish to subscribe for the *Pioneer*?"

The road chief laughed.

"Hardly. I am afraid I should be unable to secure my paper regularly. I wish to do a bit of advertising through your columns, however. How much will it cost to have this appear in the next issue?" and he handed the editor a scrap of paper, covered with writing.

After glancing it over, the editor replied:

"We can insert this for ten dollars."

"Cheap enough," assented the masked man. "Here is the money, and I warn you if that notice does not appear in your next issue, you will have the pleasure of attending your own funeral before shortly."

"As I am not at all anxious to upset this mortal bucket, I promise you that the article shall appear."

"Correct. Good-night. Sweetrest and pleasant dreams."

The road-agent chief backed to the door, and with a parting wave of the hand, made his exit.

The next issue of the *Pioneer* contained the following:

"A WORD FROM DASHING DAVE."

"It seems that the citizens of Bed-Rock have taken a sudden interest in your humble servant, and a certain 'Private Vigilance Committee' have offered \$500. reward for my capture, dead or alive. You are a mess of fools, and I laugh at you all. I defy you to capture me. This very night, one of my agents has deposited \$500 with Cool Kent, who keeps the Pleasure Parlors, which I offer, in addition to the Vigilance Committee's reward, to the person who will capture me, *dead or alive*!"

Yours lovingly,

"DASHING DAVE."

CHAPTER VI.

A STREET DUEL.

"DURN his hide! I'll have satisfaction, or my name ain't Roarin' Bob! Knocked me west-end-an'-crooked, *didn't* he? Jest hed er reg'lar cirkus at my expense, *didn't* he? Rot his pieter! I'll get even with 'im if it takes er thousan' years. I'll hev satisfaction, or I'm er howlin' liar frum Fibtown! Consarn his pate! I'll fill 'im full o' lead!"

The speaker was the bully, Roarin' Bob. He presented a sorry appearance. His lips were badly bruised, several of his front teeth were gone, one eye was "in mourning," and there was a large discolored spot upon his right temple. He appeared to be just recovering from a huge drunk.

He was viewing his image in a piece of a broken mirror, that he had tacked to the wall of his shanty. The wretched spectacle that was revealed to his one uninjured eye caused the outbreak given above.

"Took me when I was drunk, durn 'im! He couldn't 'a' done it enny other time. Oh, I'll settle this score with compound interest! I'll kill Velvet Vane, or my name ain't Roarin' Bob, ther Champion Slugger!"

"I'll pay you a hundred dollars the minute you fulfill that threat!"

Jerking out a revolver, the bully whirled to confront the man who had uttered these words.

He stood just within the cabin doorway, a medium-sized, square-built man, with a dark, handsome face.

"Hello!" exclaimed Bob. "Is that you, Colonel Allen? Howdy?"

"I have another job for you, Bob," said the

colonel, advancing and seating himself upon a broken-legged stool. "Did you take in the remark that I made as I entered?"

"Su'thin' erbout er hundred dollars. I didn't jist ketch the whole o' it."

"You threatened to kill that fellow known as the Diamond Sport, and I said that I would give you a hundred dollars the minute you did the job. Understand?"

"Bet yer boots!" cried Bob. "That's jist ther job I'm lookin' fer. Colonel, do you clap yer peepers onter this beaucherfully decorated mug o' mine? That's his work. Ther dandy did that little job. I've sworn ter hev revenge, an' now I hev er chance ter get revenge an' a hundred dollars, too. Haw! haw!"

They were master and servant in villainy, the rougher rascal doing the dirty work of the other and many a job had he performed, too.

And this was "Colonel Allen," the chief of the Private Vigilance Committee, and one of the supposed-to-be respectable citizens of Bed-Rock!

"Then you agree to settle the Sport's hash for him?" said the colonel.

"That's erbout ther size o' it."

"All right. To bind the bargain, here's ten dollars. You shall have the rest when the job's done."

"Kireet!" cried Bob, eagerly seizing the money. "This'll keep erway ther snakes an' brace me fer ther job. I'll call on yer ter-night fer ther rest o' ther pot."

"That's the way to talk," added the colonel, approvingly. "You will find the money ready for you. Just lay the Sport, and do it by fair means or foul."

"He's as good as dead!"

The colonel departed, chuckling as he hurried away, for he doubted not but Roarin' Bob would fulfill the contract. But Velvet Vane was a very hard man to kill.

A few minutes later, the bully followed Colonel Allen. Straight to the nearest saloon Roarin' Bob made his way, and regaled himself with a square drink of "ardent." In fact, he regaled himself with several square drinks. Before long he was considerably drunk. Then he sallied forth in search of his prey.

Up and down the main street he staggered, searching for the man in velvet. He was much too drunk to fight, but he didn't know it.

"Whar's that dirty purp as calls 'imself Velvet Vane?" he cried. "He's er sneak from Sneaktown, or my name ain't Roarin' Bob, ther Boss Bruiser. He dassent cum an' fight me. Whar is he, durn 'im?"

But no one seemed to know anything of the whereabouts of the Sport.

Roarin' Bob espied a trim-looking female tripping along the street, and at once made haste to intercept her.

"Hello, pritty bird," he cried with a drunken look of admiration. "Hole on; don't be in sich er tarnel rush. By glory! you're ther gal as sings at ther Pleasure Parlors. Make ye acquainted with ther only an' original Roarin' Bob."

"Stand aside, and let me pass, sir!" cried Isabella, with flashing eyes. "I will call for assistance."

"Now, don't! Fair maid, withhold thy wrath—restrain yer dander. Before ye you behold a sincere admirer. Ther heart in this majestic buzzum beats with admiration for thee. I'll be eternally dumsizzled ef you ain't er smasher!"

"Will you let me pass?" she cried.

"Never!" answered Bob, wildly flourishing his arms. "Never! never! Distractin' feemale, I will not let thee go! That exquisite nose, them starry eyes an' rooby lips all loor me on ter rashness! I gaze enraptored on that beauchiful phisog. Give ther ole original Boss Bruiser er smack, sweetcake."

With these words, he seized the girl in his arms and attempted to kiss her. She struggled desperately, and cried for help.

"Holler—yell, durn ye!" cried the bully. "Kick ef ye want to! I'll kiss yer pritty lips, or bu'st my b'iler tryin'!"

But an iron hand seized him by the neck, the girl was torn from his grasp, and he was hurled violently to the earth.

He looked up to see the very man he was searching for, the man in velvet, standing over him. The girl was hurrying away down the street.

The discomfited bully uttered an angry roar and plucked forth a revolver, with the intention of "salting" the Sport on the spot; but, before he could fire, a lightning kick of Vane's foot sent the weapon flying a rod away.

With another cry, Roarin' Bob scrambled to his feet and leaped toward his foe, a gleaming knife in his hand.

Again he met with defeat, for the Sport seized his wrist, gave it a sudden sharp wrench, that caused him to utter a howl of agony and drop the knife.

"Durn yer hide!" the bully cried; "I'll kill you yet!"

A crowd had gathered to witness the "circus." Among the throng was the red-headed man.

"Right, Bobbie," he encouraged. "Wade in an' swaller 'im. Don't be bashful, but jist wipe 'im all around over ther avenue. Show 'em what 'tis ter run against er tornader. Jist sot down on 'im, an' make 'im think he's run afoul a yarthquake. Yank 'im baldheaded. Make 'im think he's fell inter ther han's o' er Down-East school-marm. Go fer 'im red-hot, Bobbie!"

"You dassent fight me," howled Bob to the Sport.

"I should think you would be somewhere near satisfied, by this time," Vane replied. "You appear to be a genuine hog. I don't think you know when you have got enough."

"Will you fight?"

"Oh, certainly, if you are bound to fight. I warn you that I shall give you satisfaction. How will you have it?"

"Pistols, curse ye! an' I'll kill ye, too!"

"That's ther tork, Bobbie," chimed in the red-headed man. "Brace up an' give 'im glory. Fill 'im full o' holes. You can do it, if you ain't too thunderin' drunk."

"Pistols it is," asserted the Sport, determined at last to read the burly fellow a lesson, he would not soon forget. "There lies your weapon. I will use my own. You can walk down the street as far as you like. Then, if some one will kindly give the signal, we will do our best to furnish a subject for a funeral."

Roarin' Bob gave a grunt of approval. Picking up his revolver he walked slowly down the street.

"Don't go too far, Bobbie," called out the red-headed man, from behind a dry goods box, where he had thoughtfully taken refuge from all danger of stray bullets. "If yer ain't keerful you'll get so far off that it'll take er cannon ter reach yer."

"I will give the signal," said Robert Giles, stepping out of the crowd, with a cocked revolver in his hand. "I will also see fair play. The one who makes a false move, or attempts to shoot before I give the word, I will salt."

"Good enough," answered Vane.

"Look out, you durned galoot, that yer shooter don't go off accidentally an' salt somebuddy," cried the red-headed man, peering out from his refuge. "Bet er dollar yer rusty ole gun ain't loaded, anyway."

"You dry up!" cried Giles, angrily.

"Dry up! W'at, me? Reckun you don't know me. I'm dried up dryer than ther arid Dezzert o' Sahary now. Couldn't dry any dryer ef I shu'd try er month. I'm jist desert dry, I be!"

Roarin' Bob had now stopped and faced around. He was waiting for the signal.

Robert Giles stepped forward and called out:

"I will count three, and at the word you will both fire one shot each. If either of these fail to take effect, you will hold your fire until I give the signal again. Are you ready?"

"Yes," growled the bully. "Say yer prayers, Dandy-Face. I'm goin' ter bore ye."

"All ready," responded Vane, a cold, calm smile playing around his mouth.

"One," counted Giles.

Dead silence fell upon the crowd.

"Two!"

The red-headed man attempted to hide himself more effectually. With open mouths and beating hearts the spectators awaited the signal. Vane gazed along his weapon, as cool as an iceberg. Roarin' Bob swayed unsteadily.

"Three, FIRE!"

Then came two sharp reports, followed by a howl of agony from the Boss Bruiser, as he began to dance frantically around. The Diamond Sport's hat lay on the ground, pierced by a bullet.

"Great Scott!" cried the red-headed man, as he emerged from his place of refuge. "Sum-buddy's hit! Good Laud! it are Bobbie. Too bad! too bad!"

Despite his professed sorrow, there was a broad grin upon his face.

"Ouch! Oh! O-o-oh!" howled Roarin' Bob, as he danced frantically around, holding up his right hand, which was bleeding profusely. His revolver lay on the ground at his feet.

"Are you dead, Bobbie?" squealed the red-headed man, as he came rushing frantically up. "You ain't killed, be ye?"

"Get away!" cried Bob. "Hev I killed ther Sport?"

"Oh, yes," replied the red-headed man, sarcastically. "That is, you would ef you'd 'a' hit 'im; but you was so b'ildin drunk ye couldn't see straight. You'd better go an' cool off."

"You shot about two inches too high," remarked Giles, coming up. "The bullet went through his hat. A couple inches lower would have done the job. Where are you hit?"

"My hand; blast 'im, he's tore it all ter pieces."

Giles hastily examined the bully's wounded digit.

"Why," he exclaimed, "it's not so bad. Only your little finger gone. Not another mark on your hand."

"Is that so?" cried Bob! "By mighty! I thought my hull durned fist war gone."

"Will you fight him again?" eagerly asked Giles, as he bound up the wounded hand.

"Not ef I knows it! I reckon I am er leeele full. I'll get even in sum other way. I am satisfied fer this time."

"Bah! You're a coward," snarled Giles, turning abruptly away.

"Does he want another round?" inquired Vane. "I'll shoot away the little finger on his other hand next time. I could easily killed the drunken fool, but I didn't want his blood on my hands."

"He's satisfied for the present," Giles explained—"fully satisfied."

"Got er hull stummic full," the red-headed man announced, with a majestic wave of his hand. "I wish ter Moses my stummic war full. Oh! how dry I be!"

At this moment, the smothered report of a revolver was heard, and a bullet whistled by the head of the Diamond Sport.

CHAPTER VII.

THE PARSON SPEAKS.

"HULLO! So it's you, is it?" Heath cried, in astonishment, as the summary unmasking revealed the solemn, pious-looking face of Parson Grimes. "This is rather peculiar business for a man of your stamp to be engaged in. I'll be hanged if you ain't a double-dyed old fraud!"

"Thanks, friends, for the compliment," the parson said, quite coolly. "This little piece of disguise business seems to have fallen through—sort of caved in, so to speak. That beard was a miserable fit, anyway, and always felt uncomfortable. It is quite a relief to have it off."

Much to Heath's astonishment, the parson seemed perfectly unconcerned by what had happened. His face was perfectly calm, and his voice was free from a tremor.

"Who in Satan's name are you, anyhow?" Heath cried, fiercely flinging the beard upon the floor.

"Plain Parson Grimes, at your service. Leaving my little flock in the care of another, I wandered away from the verdant State of Vermont, to seek my future in the much-talked-of Western mines. There, you have everything in a nutshell."

"I believe you lie!"

The parson laughed quietly.

"As you like," he said. "It makes little difference to me what you think. The greater rogue a man is the more he suspects his fellow-men. You seem very suspicious."

"Bother your talk! Bridle your tongue, and let's come to an understanding. I'd like to know what kind of a game you are up to. I'll be hanged if I don't believe you are a detective!"

"Undoubtedly you will be hanged, anyway. What you believe and what you do not will make little difference in that affair. If I were a detective, you'd be a mighty good subject for me to jot down in my 'rogue list.'"

"I'm going to tell you one thing," Heath cried angrily. "Whether you are a detective or not, you have run your nose into a mighty warm corner, and the sooner you settle and come to an agreement, the better it will be for you."

The parson laughed in a cool, exasperating way. He seemed little disturbed by Heath's threat.

"You are talking wild now. I told you who I was. Just plain Jonathan Grimes, parson, from Greenbush, Vermont. Instead of running my nose into a warm corner, it strikes me that I have dropped into a fat snap. That there's money in it I am satisfied."

"There may be, but we are desperate men, and I warn you not to push us too far. We will pay you a fair sum to close your mouth, but high figures we cannot and will not pay."

Rather than to have a dead man on our hands, we are willing to settle this matter as easily as possible."

"Exactly," said the parson, in a lazy, indifferent way. "I am willing to settle as easy as you please. You understand about how this matter lays. You folks are going to fall into a big fortune, which you have no more right to than the man in the moon has."

"Well?"

"Well, I have dropped on your little game, and I mean to come in for a little slice of that fortune. Do you savvy?"

"Look out!" cried Heath fiercely. "Look out that you don't run against a lead ball before you lug off a slice of that fortune. You may leave your bones among these hills."

Again the parson gave vent to that lazy, indifferent laugh.

"If that is your game, you are fools to let me know it. In my opinion, friend, there is much more vapor to you than anything else. You seem capable of looking very fierce and talking very ugly, but I guess that is about all there is to it."

It was all Heath could do to restrain his anger. He was boiling over with rage. He would have liked to fly at this taunting man's throat and choke the life out of his body, but by a desperate effort he controlled his rage.

"Let us come to an understanding at once," he said snarply.

"By all means," replied the parson. "I would like as well as you to get this matter settled. But I warn you that, when I talk, I talk business. It is going to cost you something to keep me silent, and you may as well settle your mind on that point. It will take a heap to get the better of my conscience. It is no easy thing for a man who has been square and honorable all his days, a man who has ever loved his neighbor as himself, a man who has been a faithful servant of the Lord—"

"Bah!" cried Heath. "Do let up! You make me tired."

"I say," continued Parson Grimes calmly, "that it is a difficult thing for such a person to enter into such a condemnably villainous scheme as this. It is going to take thousands to drown my religious scruples. I hope the Lord will have mercy on my soul if I enter into it at all."

"When you get through with this taffying business we will talk common sense. You need not set your mind on drowning your religious scruples with thousands, because you will never have the chance."

"Won't I?"

"No, you won't! You may as well understand that, first as last. What will you take to clear out and never interfere with our game?"

"I believe you heard my figures a few minutes ago. I have not changed my mind since. In fact, when I settle my mind on anything, it takes a great deal to change it."

"This is folly!" Heath cried. "You ought to know that we shall never pay such a sum as that. I will offer you every cent we can, or will pay you—just five hundred dollars. Do you accept?"

"By no means. Do you take me for an out-and-out double-distilled fool? I told you that I meant business when I talked. I'll have my figures or nothing."

"Then I reckon you'll take nothing."

"Very well," with cool indifference; "go on with this game if you dare. I know what I am doing, and don't you forget it. The minute you attempt to carry out your plot I'll expose the whole scheme. Go on with your circus."

"You never'll live, curse you—"

"Na-ow, hold on!" cried the parson, shoving a revolver under Heath's nose. "Don't you attempt to draw a weapon on me. I haven't a single doubt but that you would like to lodge a ball in my brain, but I am not at all agreeable to any such experiment. Leave that shooting-iron where it is."

With a hoarse growl Heath relinquished his hold on the revolver. If the parson had not been on the alert, under the angry impulse of the moment, the fiery-tempered villain would have shot him dead. But about that time, Parson Grimes was very wide awake.

The parson laughed as he lowered his revolver. He seemed very little like a parson now. Much more like a cool, nery man, who thoroughly understood his business.

"Now, friend, continued the parson, 'what is the use of getting all riled up? I wouldn't be in your place now for ten dollars. You have worked yourself into an excruciating pitch of agony. Such spells are destructive to health, and sure destroyers of long life. Bridle your

tongue and your temper and you will probably live your entire lifetime."

"Will you cease this cursed fool-talk?" cried Heath, thoroughly exasperated. "I never saw such a condemned idiot. Again, and for the last time, I ask you, do you accept my offer?"

"Nary!" responded the parson, straightening up. "I will talk straight enough to suit you. You shall pay me a reasonable sum, or I will balk your whole game. I will give you just three days to think this matter over. If you feel lenient at the end of that time, you can easily hunt me up. If you do not, you will hear from me again. Do you understand?"

"That's plain enough."

"I'm glad of it. I didn't know as it would be. I am going now," rising to his feet, and still holding his revolver in his hand. "I'll trouble you for that beard. Thanks."

"Go!" growled Heath. "Hurry up and get out of here. I've seen and heard all I want to of you."

"Haven't a doubt of it. I've seen a great deal more than I wanted to, of you. Think my offer over, friend. Ta, ta!"

He backed to the door, and, with a low bow, disappeared.

Heath listened a moment to the sound of his retreating footsteps; sprung to his feet, foaming with rage. He rushed wildly around the room, uttering volley after volley of oaths.

"I'll kill him! I will! I will! I will!" he grated, through his clinched teeth. "I was reluctant about entering into this game, but now I'm in it, soul and body. Nothing shall thwart me! He shall die! If it is necessary, I will do the job with my own hands! The sum he asks cannot and shall not be paid. Lightning blast the fool!"

Suddenly he drew his revolver and sprung to the window. This he threw open, and thrust out his head, peering eagerly up and down the street. The object he was looking for, the parson, was some distance down the street, walking rapidly away. Heath half-raised his revolver, then lowered it with a shake of his head.

"This won't do," he muttered. "That would be a genuine fool-trick. It must be done secretly and quietly."

"Hullo!" called a voice behind him. "What's the trouble?"

Heath whirled around to see Isabella, the Song Queen, regarding him with a look of astonishment.

"What's the trouble?" she repeated.

"Trouble enough," Heath replied. "I have just had an interview with the spy, who overheard the outlines of our game. I couldn't come within a hundred miles of satisfying him! but he'll get satisfaction yet."

"What do you mean?"

Heath replied with a hard laugh that spoke volumes. There was a snaky, evil glitter in his eyes. He was in a decidedly dangerous mood. The parson had made a bitter foe.

"Isabella, nothing shall spoil this little game. There is enough money in it to allow us all to go away to some foreign land and live in luxury. Once we get the ducks safely in our fingers, it's ship. It wouldn't do to remain, for the simple little reason that, although it is very improbable, the real heiress might turn up."

She compressed her lips and said nothing, but there was a look of angry protest in her eyes. It was evident that she was not greatly enamored with the game she was about to enter into.

"Sit down," commanded Heath, "and I will tell you all about our little interview. If you are at all interested in this matter, you want to get a good grip upon your temper and hold on while I am talking. I am so mad now that I can hardly breathe."

They sat down, and Heath told her all about the interview with the parson. She listened quietly till he was done. Then he said:

"Well, Isy, what do you think about it?"

"If I was going to express my opinion fairly, I should say that we are entering into a very dangerous as well as dishonest game. It is my opinion that the whole business will fall through, and if we don't look sharp we shall find ourselves within prison walls."

"Bah! You're faint-hearted. You must brace up. Just think of the chink in the pot! I tell you it's worth making a try for."

"The money is well enough, but it is better to get what we want in an honest way. I have told you my opinion of the game. However, I suppose you will do as you please, and I shall have to do as you want me to."

"You're getting on the contrary side. You shouldn't be so very scrupulous, for you know you married a gambler."

She sprung to her feet, her dark eyes flashing.

"Little I knew that he was a gambler!" she cried. "I took him because I loved him, and believed him the very soul of honor. Was it my fault that he turned out to be a dishonest reprobate? Little did I once think he would one day taunt me with his own dishonesty. Oh, S! Si! how I have loved you! and you are still my lawful husband."

"Hold your tongue!" he hissed. "Keep it still, will you? You are bound to let the cat out of the bag. No one knows around here that you are my wife, but you seem determined to post them on that line."

"Yes," she said, slowly; "no one knows that I am your wife, and I am thought the worse for it. If the facts were known, it would wash my name clear of the stain upon it. But, no one knows—no one knows!"

"Well, well," returned Heath, making an attempt to pacify her. "It is better for no one to know. If they did, the Song Queen would soon fail to be the taking card at the Pleasure Parlors."

"But the worst of this is, you want me to pretend to marry another man," she said, scornfully. "You want me to sell myself, soul and body for money! Bah! the very thought of it makes me sick. I am convinced that you never loved me. If you had you would not want me to enter into such a disreputable scheme. You would not even scheme to have me assent to marry that villainous Giles, when you know that I hate him—hate him! hate him!"

CHAPTER VIII.

COLONEL ALLEN MASQUERADES.

COLONEL ALLEN had been an eye-witness of the street-duel between his tool, Roarin' Bob, and the Diamond Sport.

Standing in the long upper corridor of one of Bed-Rock's hotels, from a convenient window he had watched the whole affair, from beginning to end.

A growl of disapproval came from his lips when he perceived the "boosy" condition that the Boss Bruiser was in.

"Infernal idiot!" he cried. "I was a fool to let him have any money till he completed the job. He's drunk, and is apt to make a mess of the affair. He's no match for that traitor, anyway. Why didn't he wait and knife him in the back?"

Another fierce growl came from his lips when he witnessed the result of the duel.

"Just as I expected," he muttered. "He has made a miserable failure, but I will put a spoke in the wheel of Mr. Velvet Vane, curse him!"

With these words, he drew a revolver and took a deliberate aim at the head of the Sport. Just as he pulled the trigger, his arm was dashed upward, and, although the bullet sped out through the window and dangerously near the head of his enemy, the colonel's dastardly attempt was frustrated.

A sharp voice cried in his ear:

"Found at last, murderer!"

The colonel did not stop for thought, but his heavy fist fell with crushing force upon the wild, desperate face upturned to him. It was a stunning blow, and the victim was hurled backward and fell senseless to the floor; then the assailant turned, and, unobserved, made his exit by a back way.

"It is getting a trifle too warm around here," he muttered, as he hurried away. "They are hot after me, but I imagine they will have a bit of sport before they ring in a cold deal on your humble servant. That traitorous dog shall die, if I have to kill him with my own hands! The next move I make will be to strike for the girl."

He reached his "headquarters," and proceeded to arrange a complete disguise. "If I want to succeed, I must hide myself behind a mask. Velvet Vane must never set eyes on 'Colonel Allen,' for those eyes of his are too very sharp. He would know me instantly. But I reckon it will take sharper eyes than his to penetrate this disguise."

The disguise was indeed admirably gotten up. Few would have recognized in that portly, well-dressed, florid-faced old gentleman the well-known and popular Colonel Allen.

The amusements that evening at the Pleasure Parlors were progressing smoothly, when this person put in an appearance at that resort. Among the throng he attracted but little attention.

He wandered through the rooms seeking for the Sport, but Vane was not to be found. Evidently he had not yet arrived.

Roarin' Bob was there, however. The bully's

wounded hand was rudely bandaged. Bob had not been drinking much, but was sauntering around the room closely inspecting every one. Evidently he was searching for some one.

The disguised colonel touched the bully on the arm, and said in a low tone, that could be heard by the bruiser only:

"Come this way. I want to speak with you."

"Waal, I'll be shot fer a—!" Bon began, but Allen interrupted him with a warning gesture.

"Hush, you fool!" he said, in a low, yet stern voice. "Tie up your tongue and follow me."

Wonderingly, Roarin' Bob complied. Allen led the way to an unoccupied corner of the gambling room. Here he seated himself at a deal table. Bob sat down opposite.

"Durned ef I knew ye!" he muttered. "Can I wag me jaw?"

"Talk low," cautioned the colonel.

"W'at's ther game now? Durned ef I w'u'dn't like ter know w'at ye'r rigged out in this style fer."

"Never mind that; I have good reasons. For a time Colonel Allen must not be seen in Bed-Rock."

"W'at's ther meanin' o' this turn?"

"Things have transpired that make it decidedly unsafe for Colonel Allen to be seen in this camp. By the way, you made a flat failure in your attempt to dispose of the Sport."

"Yes, durn 'im! Hayre's his mark," holding up the wounded hand.

"You were drunk—at least, too drunk to fight," declared the colonel, with a touch of anger in his tones. "You made a fool of yourself! Don't for a moment think that in a fair fight you can get away with Velvet Vane, as he is called. Knife him in the back! That is as good a way as any, and it is the easiest and safest."

"Kirect."

"Now I have another job for you. Do you know the female you stopped in the street today?"

"Yes, she war ther gal as sings in this hayre saloon."

"Right. Now each night after she sings, she leaves here by a back door and makes her way to her room in Metcalf's Hotel. She must not reach her room to-night. Do you understand?"

"Great Moses!" exclaimed the startled bully. "Do you want me ter knife her?"

"No! no! Not by any means. I want you to be ready when she leaves to take her prisoner. Make every provision to keep her from uttering an outcry; take her prisoner, and bring her to the big pine that stands just at the mouth of the deserted mine at the southern extremity of the camp. Do you think you can do it with that hand?"

"W'at's ther indocuments?"

"A clean hundred."

"That settles it. I'll be thar wi' ther female."

"Good enough! Now don't make a failure of this affair."

"You may bet yer life I won't. As sure as my name are Roarin' Bob, I'll be thar."

The two villains separated, Colonel Allen at once leaving the room.

Feeling immensely pleased by the prospect of obtaining a hundred dollars at one haul, Roarin' Bob lingered around the Pleasure Parlors. He drank but little, just enough to nerve him for the desperate deed he was to do.

He saw nothing of the man in velvet, and he was glad that he did not meet him. He had resolved that his next attempt upon the life of Vane should be successful. He would not make an open attempt, but, taking Colonel Allen's advice, would shoot or stab him in the back.

The bully kept very quiet, making no move to attract attention. He was patiently waiting for the Song Queen to appear.

The Diamond Sport was not in the saloon.

Giles was there. He desired to hear Isabella sing again.

The hour arrived for the Song Queen to appear, and as soon as she stepped upon the stage Roarin' Bob left the room and made his way cautiously round to the back side of the building. Crouching in the darkness near the back door, he waited for the girl to appear.

It was some time before the door opened and the girl stepped out into the darkness.

She turned to move away when, with a sudden spring, the bully leaped upon her. In his sound hand he held a handkerchief, with which he intended to gag her. He clasped her around the shoulders and attempted to cover her mouth with his huge hand before she could utter a cry.

But his wounded hand bothered him, and he made a bungling failure.

When she felt herself seized by unknown

Isabella gave utterance to a wild shriek that was heard by more than one person.

With a fierce curse, Roarin' Bob forced the gag into her mouth, but finding that she fought like a wildcat, proceed to choke her until she was quite insensible.

As he held her limp form in his arms, the bully heard rapid footsteps approaching. Without waiting, Bob dashed away into the darkness, bearing the unconscious girl.

A sharp voice cried out to him:

"Stop, you villain!"

Then, as Roarin' Bob still ran on, there came a sharp report, and a bullet sped by his head. But in firing that shot the pursuer baffled himself. For a moment the flash of the weapon blinded his eyes, and when he again peered through the darkness the fleeing form had disappeared.

Straight for the deserted mine the bruiser made his way. In a few moments he reached the place.

He paused beneath a big pine, and, laying the girl on the ground, waited for Colonel Allen to appear.

He did not have long to wait, for in a few moments he saw a dark form coming toward the tree.

"Who's that?" challenged Bob, cocking a revolver.

"It is I, Bob," replied a voice. "Have you got the girl?"

"Bet yer life!"

Then, as the colonel came up, Bob saw that he had a black mask over his face.

"What yer got that thing on fer?" growled the bully.

"It is best the girl should not see my face. But, what was the meaning of that shot?"

"Waal, ye see as how sum durned galoot got after me an' invited me to stop. I declined, an' he slung a hunk of lead arter me. Kum durned near takin' an' ear off, too."

"How did any one happen to get after you?"

"My han' bothered me an' ther blamed gal squealed w'en I grabbed 'er. Dashed ef I didn't hev ter choke 'er to keep 'er still."

"You did?" cried the colonel, in alarm. "Hang the luck! I hope you haven't killed her!"

He hastily lit a match and bent over the unconscious girl, throwing the light in her face. At a glance he saw that she had swooned from fright more than from the choking she had received.

As Colonel Allen bent over the girl, the light from the match reflecting on his own face a shot rung out, and a flying bullet knocked the masked man's hat from his head!

CHAPTER IX.

HIS TRUE COLORS.

THE colonel sprung to his feet, dropping the burning match.

A sharp voice cried:

"Death to the outlaw chief!"

Then a slender form came bounding through the darkness toward the two men.

Placing a whistle to his lips, the colonel blew a shrill blast, and instantly several dark forms appeared, hurrying toward them. The stranger who had fired the shot saw them, and, turning, tried to escape; but with half-a-dozen bounds, the colonel was upon him.

A blow with the heavy butt of a revolver knocked the fleeing form to the ground, and he was bound hand and foot.

Then the dark forms, which proved to be masked men, surrounded them, and the colonel lit another match and bent over his new captive.

"Now we'll know who you are, my fine fellow!" he growled.

The light of the burning match revealed the stern face and defiant, flashing eyes of the boy, Ned Cole.

"So it's you, is it?" exclaimed the colonel. "I tried to knock some sense into your head when you attacked me in the hotel to-day, but it seems that I failed."

Then to the masked men:

"Gag him, boys!"

This command was quickly obeyed.

"Now bring up the horses," was the next order.

The chief then placed a roll of bills in Roarin' Bob's hand, saying:

"There is your pay for this job. Now, see that you keep your mouth shut. Do not mention this night's work to any one."

"Trust ther Boss Bruiser fer thet."

"Very well. You had better get back to the camp now."

Taking the hint, Bob at once struck out for his shanty in the camp.

A few moments later some of the masked men came up, leading several horses. After seeing Ned Cole bound securely upon a horse's back, the leader mounted his own horse, and one of the men handed up the captive girl to him. The other men sprung upon their horses, and without a word the masked horsemen rode silently away.

On into the darkness they rode; away among the hills, bearing two helpless captives with them—captives who were being carried to an unknown fate. Not a word was uttered by any of the grim band as they rode along through the dark gulches.

An hour later, after climbing a difficult mountain-trail, they entered the concealed mouth of a cave that was large enough to admit the horses with riders on their backs. A guard was stationed at the mouth of the cave, but after a few words he allowed them to pass.

A short distance on, they halted in the darkness, and a sharp whistle sounded through the underground passage. In a few moments, a bearded man appeared, bearing two lanterns.

The masked colonel slid from the back of his horse and lowered the now conscious Isabella to the rock floor.

Leaving the men to take care of the horses, the colonel unbound the captive girl's feet, and taking one of the lanterns led the way through a dark passage.

Finally they entered a small rocky cavern or room, at one side of which was a rude table, upon which a lamp was burning. There were some rough chairs in the room, and at one side was a sort of couch, covered with a buffalo's hide.

He led his captive to this couch, and motioned for her to be seated.

"Ah! dear Isabella!" he exclaimed, "I forgot that handkerchief in your mouth. It must be uncomfortable. Pray allow me to remove it, and I beg you forgive me for not doing so sooner."

He removed the handkerchief and untied her hands. All the while she kept her eyes, in the depths of which shone mingled fear and anger, fastened upon him; but she did not speak.

"You are free to use your tongue now, my dear," observed the masked man, when he had unbound her.

"Who are you?" was her first question.

"Who am I? Well, I know of no reason why I should not reveal myself to you. I am one whom you well know. See!"

He quietly removed the mask.

"Colonel Allen!" exclaimed the girl.

"Quite right. Back in Bed-Rock I am known as Colonel Allen; but you have known me under another name."

"If you are mistaken, sir. I never knew you only as Colonel Allen."

"Nevertheless, I have known you when you bore a name other than the one by which you are now known," he declared.

"Perhaps. It matters little if you did. But what was the name, please?"

"Annie Maines!"

The girl gave a start of surprise, but almost instantly said:

"You are mistaken, sir. That never was my name. I know not why you have brought me here, but I think you have made a mistake. You had better release me at once."

Her eyes were flashing now, and it was evident that her spirit was rising.

The man laughed shortly.

"You can't play that on me," he said. "You are Annie Maines, and you know well enough that I am Dashing Dave, the road-agent chief. You slipped through my fingers once, and, with the assistance of my traitor lieutenant, managed to escape; but I have you now, and mean to hold you fast."

"You are wrong, sir. You have mistaken me for some other person. I would have you know that I have friends in Bed-Rock who will search for me, and it is best for you to set me at liberty at once."

For a moment the outlaw chief seemed angered.

"Why do you deny that you are Annie Maines?" he cried. "You cannot deceive me. You well know that my followers and a band of Indians swept down on the Fairgrave wagon-train and destroyed it. You and your husband were with that train. You were both taken prisoners, but he came to his end when he attempted to assassinate me. I was forced to kill him. I carried you to my stronghold and would have made you my wife, but my lieutenant fell in love with you and turned traitor on me. One night he deserted, taking you with him. I fol-

lowed on your trail, but in some manner he baffled all pursuit. I lost all track of you, and gave up ever seeing you more. But fortune favored me. When I came with my followers to this part of the country I had no hope of finding you here. But I did. You were known not as Annie Maines, but as Isabella Arnold, the Song Queen.

"Now are you convinced that I know you?"

"Quite the contrary," replied the girl. "I am now sure that you do not know me. I tell you fairly and honestly, that I am not this Annie Maines."

The outlaw chief seemed puzzled as well as angry. He was confident that he was right, and the girl's persistent denials that she was Annie Maines puzzled him. What could her object be? Finally he said:

"It makes no difference whether you are or are not Annie Maines. You are the woman I propose to make my wife. I brought you here for that purpose, and when you leave this mountain cave you will be Mrs. Dashing Dave."

"Then I shall never leave this cave!" cried the girl, with flashing eyes. "I will never marry you! You cannot force me to do that!"

The outlaw chief smiled grimly.

"You do not know my power," he replied. "If you did, you would not say that."

"I know enough of you! You have told me enough with your own lips to make me heartily detest you. You are a person who has allied himself with Indians—a renegade white man!—a murderer!"

She sprung to her feet and stood confronting him as she uttered these words. When she ceased speaking, her strength failed her, and she sunk back on the couch.

For a moment the outlaw shrunk before her. Then a sudden change came over him. He drew near her.

"Isabella," he said, slowly, half-pleadingly, "I love you. I fell in love with you the moment I saw you, and saved you from being slain by the savages who destroyed the train. If you will become my wife I will give up this wild life. I am rich, and will do anything for you. We will go to some foreign country, where I am unknown, and live. Every luxury the heart can crave shall be yours. What is your answer?"

"My answer is No! Rather than to become your wife, I would take my life with my own hand!"

The outlaw chief turned away, giving utterance to a sharp whistle. A moment later two men appeared.

"Take her away!" ordered the chief. "To the first prison chamber with her, but have a care, for your charge is a precious one."

Without a word the two men lifted her and bore her away; then, taking a lantern, the outlaw chief made his way along one of the long passages. He descended a flight of steps and entered a long cavern. At one side was an iron-framed door, across which were heavy bars of iron. It looked like a prison door, and the cell beyond was known in the outlaws' stronghold as "The Dungeon."

Holding up his lantern, the chief peered into the cell. The uncertain light showed him a form sitting on a rough stool.

Unlocking the iron door with a huge key, the outlaw entered the cell. The light of the lantern he carried now showed the prisoner to be the desperate boy, Ned Cole.

"I thought they would put you here," remarked Dashing Dave. "Now, my fine lad, look up here. I have a word to say to you."

But the boy did not raise his head. His hat, which he had pulled well down over his eyes, kept his features in shadow.

"You needn't sulk, my lad," continued the outlaw. "You are in for it, and may as well make the best of it. I'd like to know who you are, anyway?"

Still the boy remained silent.

"Why don't you speak?" cried the outlaw, angrily. "You had better not try any cross-grained games here, for if you do, you will soon be broke of them. I do not know who you are, and care little. However, you have made two attempts on my life. For what reason I do not know. Probably for some fancied wrong I have done you. But we will let that pass, now. You are in my power, and there is but one way for you to ever leave this cavern alive."

The outlaw paused a moment, then continued: "I have taken a fancy to spare your life. For what reason I do not myself know. But if you will come to my terms, I will spare you. The only way that you can ever live to leave this cavern is by joining my band. It is a jolly, free-and-easy life. Will you join us?"

"No!" shouted the boy, and, with a cat-like leap, he sprung upon the outlaw. In his hand the boy held a round stone with which he struck the astonished man square on the head. The blow partially stunned Dave, and for a time it seemed as though the boy would get the best of the conflict. It was a fierce struggle, but the chief soon flung the boy from him.

The lad struck the rocks with great force, and falling in a heap, lay still.

With a harsh laugh, the outlaw turned and left the cell, clanging the iron door behind him.

CHAPTER X.

SEARCHING FOR THE STRONGHOLD.

IN spite of everything that the double-faced chief had said to him in order to keep him still concerning what had happened, Roaring Bob got very drunk and let slip some words that put Heath and Giles on track of the missing girl. The two men were very much alarmed by the sudden disappearance of the girl, and were searching for some trace of her, when they stumbled upon the drunken bully, and, from some words he let drop, they came to the conclusion that Isabella had been carried away to the mountains by a band of masked horsemen.

Giles furnished Bob with liquor, and endeavored to "pump" him, but he could learn little more than the points already secured. For all of his drunkenness, the bully was shrewd enough to claim that he had seen the whole affair from a secure hiding-place.

The Diamond Sport heard the bully's story and turned away, with a look of alarm upon his face.

"It must be that the Song Queen is the one for whom I am searching," he mused. "If she is not Annie Maines, why should Dashing Dave take her prisoner and carry her away to his stronghold, as he probably has done? It must be. Anyway, I will search for the outlaws' den, and attempt to rescue the girl, if I can find her."

The red-headed man came staggering toward him.

"Ding it, partner!" said that peculiar individual, as he came up, "this heer's a beastly scrape, now, ain't it? Hanged ef I don't feel interested in the row. Say, partner, less go fer her galoot an' take ther gal away from him."

The red-headed man seemed very much in earnest, and the Sport was forced to smile.

"I got er hoss," he continued. "Bought him ter-day. I happened ter find er little loose change in one o' my pockets, an' takin' er fancy to er little hoss, I bought him. Oh, I'm fixed! Now you git er hoss, an' we'll strike out fer ther outlaw an' ther gal. W'ot d'yer say?"

"I will think about it," the Sport answered. "If I conclude to go with you, I will let you know."

"Kirect. You had better go, Kid-Gloves. If ye make up yer mind to do so, jest call on yours truly."

The man in velvet had decided to make an attempt to discover the outlaw's retreat, but he did not wish to be incumbered by the red-headed man. It did not take Vane long to find a horse that he fancied, and the good round price which the owner demanded for him was paid, and the horse became the Sport's property. He bought a saddle and bridle, and thus equipped, was prepared for the expedition.

"Now to find the outlaws' den," he muttered, as he left the camp and struck out into the southern gulch, but he did not know in which direction the ruffian had left Bed-Rock, but, as luck would have it, he was following their very footsteps.

Perhaps a mile out of the mining-camp Vane observed a horseman some distance ahead of him, slowly making his way along the gulch. The sport observed the man closely, and at once saw that he looked familiar. Arranging his revolvers so that he could grasp them in an instant, the Diamond Sport hastened to overtake the strange horseman.

As he drew near, the man looked more familiar. Soon the rider heard the sound of Vane's horse's hoofs, and turned round to look back. The Sport gave a muttered exclamation of amazement. It was the red-headed man.

The red-headed man seemed no less surprised than the Sport. Drawing up his horse he waited for Vane to approach.

"Durn me fer a clam!" he exclaimed. "It ar' Kid-Gloves. Now this are lucky. I had no idee yer w'u'd strike out so soon, partner, an' while we war waitin' I thought I w'u'd jist strike out an' try me noble charger. It's great luck that I didn't miss yer."

The Sport saw that he was "in for it," he was

bound to have the red-headed man on his hands anyway, and he might as well make the best of it.

"Blamed ef me ole hoss ain't quite a fiery steed," continued the red-head. "I didn't think thar was ser much ter him till I tried 'im. Ain't he a clean one, partner?"

Vane saw at a glance that the horse was in truth a very good animal.

"He looks well," he assented.

"Waal, he's just as good as he looks, an' er little better. I say, Kid-Gloves, you ain't got er snifter anywhere round yer pusson, hev ye? I'm jist desert dry."

"Not a snifter, my sorrel-topped friend."

"Say, now," cried the red-headed man, "don't make fun o' my hair! It's er great misfortune ter hev a head like mine. Feller can't go 'long er street arter dark unless everybuddy takes 'im fer an animated lamp-post. Durned ef 'tain't aggrivatin'!"

They continued on together, the red-head chattering all the time. The Sport would have given much to have been rid of his companion, but he well knew that any attempt to get clear of him would be useless.

Coming round a sudden bend in the gulch, they beheld an amusing spectacle. In fact, it was of such a pleasing nature that they both laughed aloud.

A short distance away was a long, lank individual, mounted upon the back of a little, vicious-looking mule. The long legs of this individual, who was none other than Parson Grimes, nearly touched the ground. The mule was rearing and bucking in a vigorous attempt to unseat the parson, who was clinging fast to the animal's short mane.

"Blast your hide!" shouted the parson, as he did his best to thrash the mule's sides with his long legs.

"Condemn your hide! Try to throw me off, will ye! I'll learn you!" and the parson beat the mule with one hand while he held on with the other.

The red-headed man burst into a roar of laughter that was heard by the parson, who looked up and saw the two men.

The mule suddenly ceased his antics, whereupon the parson slowly dismounted, and holding the animal by the bit, proceeded to deliberately deal it several violent kicks in the ribs. Then, turning to the two men, he said:

"Friends, there is a time to dance, a time to pray, and a time to kick an ugly mule. At present I am impressed that it is the last-mentioned time," and with these words, he again delivered several hard kicks upon the mule's ribs.

"Hole on there, parson!" cried the red-head. "Be keerful, or you'll kick ther wind out o' ther beast."

"There is little danger of that," retorted the parson. "The animal is too ugly to lose its wind in that way. However, I think I have him well subjected."

The parson then climbed upon the mule's back; but he was barely seated when the little beast suddenly elevated his hind feet, and the parson sailed gracefully over his head, and struck in a sprawling attitude on the ground. The mule stood quite still, regarding him with eyes that seemed filled with wonder.

The red-head nearly choked with laughter.

The parson slowly and painfully arose to his feet. He approached the mule, and taking the animal by the bridle, began patting its neck.

"It may be," spoke the parson, solemnly, "it may be that I was too hasty in my attempt to subdue this animal. Perhaps it would be better to be kind than to chasten."

He then began calling the mule pet names, talked softly, patting and rubbing its neck all the while. After several minutes of this business, the parson ventured to again climb upon the animal's back. The mule stood quite still, not offering to play any of his old tricks.

The parson smiled blandly as he noted his success.

"Let this be a lesson to you, friends," said the parson. "If you cannot conquer by force, try kindness. If, in my haste and the heat of the moment, I uttered words of an improper nature, forget them. Satan tempts mortals, and at times the best of them err."

"Eggsactly, parson," rejoined the red-head. "Everything are fergot. Course er feller can't pick his words w'en he's b'ilin' mad. Nobuddy expects him to. But I say, ole man, has ye got jist er drap o' suthin' 'bout yer pusson?"

"A drop of something?"

"Yes, thet's it. Jist er smell o' whisky, or suthin' bracin'."

"Ah, I understand! Happily, friend, I have

a very little here which I purchased in order to secure repose at night."

The parson produced a flat quart bottle from one of his capacious pockets. The red-headed man's eyes glowed as he saw the flask. Hastily reaching out, he secured the coveted prize.

"Hyer's long life to ye, parson," and the next moment the liquor was gurgling down the red-head's throat.

With some alarm, as he saw the liquid disappear, the parson grasped the bottle and wrested it from the red-head's hands, who uttered a sigh of disappointment as it was carried beyond his reach.

"Don't be greedy, friend," cried the parson.

"Thankee fer ther taste," was the reply; "but ye needn't 'a' been so scat."

The parson replaced the bottle in his pocket, at the same time inquiring why they were there. Before Vane could stop him, and much to the Sport's disgust, the red-headed man at once spluttered out that they were searching for the outlaws' den. The parson expressed a determination to join them, and when they moved on, he went with them.

Vane now gave up all hope of finding any trace of the brigands. With the red-head and the parson on his hands, he reasoned that to search for the den would be worse than useless.

However, he did not at once turn his horse's head toward Bed-Rock.

The strange trio rode on for some time. Finally they halted many miles from Bed-Rock.

"This business seems like s'archin' fer er needle in er haystack," declared the red-head.

The man in velvet said nothing, but he was busily scanning the rocky slopes.

They had halted at the foot of a very high mountain, and just before them it rose precipitously, seeming unscalable; but the sharp eyes of the Sport espied what he considered a possible means of ascent, even for a horseman. He well knew that, if the first steep incline could be overcome, a passable trail might be found up the mountain-side.

Vane dismounted and began viewing the base of the precipitous incline. Bending low, a close inspection soon revealed to him marks of iron-shod hoofs, and he soon decided that the marks had been made quite recently.

Had he luckily and unwittingly stumbled upon the outlaws' trail? It might be so.

He at once remounted his horse, and bidding his companions wait where they were till he returned, he dashed straight up the precipitous ascent. It seemed an impossible feat for a horse to mount the steep and rocky incline, but bending nobly to its work the faithful beast mounted up, up!

With bated breath, Parson Grimes, and the red-head watched the daring Sport. Every moment they expected to see the horse lose its footing and come rolling down with its rider. A few loose stones, started by the horse's feet, came rattling down, but still the struggling beast mounted upward.

The summit of the incline was safely reached, and turning in the saddle, Vane waved his hand to the two men below him, then disappeared among the scraggy pines that grew upon the mountain-side.

In truth the Sport had stumbled upon a trail seldom used by the outlaws, but one that on several occasions had proved of great service to some one of them when hard pressed. It was, in fact, a sort of back way to the outlaws' stronghold.

Parson Grimes and his red-headed companion patiently waited the return of the Sport. The minutes became hours, but the man in velvet did not return.

CHAPTER XI.

THE TABLES TURNED.

DASHING DAVE was in no pleasant humor as he strode away from the Dungeon, after the encounter with the desperate boy.

"Curse him!" growled the outlaw chief, as he tenderly rubbed his bruised and swelling head. "Did the fool think to escape? Why, if he had overcoma me, I fancy he would have been puzzled to find his way out of this cavern. Even if he had taken the right passage, he would have been snubbed by the guard."

The outlaw made his way back to the chamber where he had first carried the girl.

As soon as he reached this chamber he again uttered the signal whistle.

In a few moments a man stood before him.

"Send Pistol Rube and Bowie Sam here," commanded the outlaw.

With a nod the man disappeared, and a few

minutes later two ruffianly looking fellows stood before their chief.

Dashing Dave was filling a fine meerschaum pipe when they appeared, and for some moments did not appear to notice them. Finally, when he had finished filling and lighted his pipe, without glancing at the two men, the outlaw chief said:

"Both of you chaps belonged to my band when, in consolidation with Bounding Elk's band of red-skins, we wiped out the Fairgrave emigrant train, didn't you?"

A growl of assent came from the two ruffians.

"Very well," continued the chief, pulling leisurely at his pipe. "You know who my trusted second officer was then, of course—Reckless Robin he was called, and a more daring devil does not live to-day."

"It's the truth you're givin' us now," growled Bowie Sam.

"Of course you know that he turned traitor on me shortly after the Fairgrave affair," and pulls at the pipe became short and even. "He not only turned traitor, but released from my custody a prisoner whom I considered very valuable. You know the doom of a traitor?"

"Death!" replied the two ruffians in a single breath. The word sounded muffled and awful in that rocky chamber.

"Right; death it is," and for a time the outlaw took the pipe from his mouth that he might speak more freely. "Reckless Robin has never paid the penalty, but he must—he shall!"

Another growl of approval came from the two ruffians.

"Now, my lads, Reckless Robin is down in Bed-Rock, where he is known as Velvet Vane. Last night one of the band attempted to take the traitor's life, but failed, and his own life would have paid the penalty had I not had a few of the boys near at hand. They made a dash through the camp, and in the excitement I released our man. Then I engaged a big fellow to dispose of the traitor, but he made a botch job of the first attempt, and has a wounded hand now that may prevent him from making the trial. I can't depend on him."

"I sh'd rayther kalkerlate not," observed Pistol Rube. "If he failed fu'st off, he may fare wuss second round."

"Solid hoss sense," declared the chief, approvingly. "With his wounded hand he's no match for the traitor, unless he has big advantage. At any rate, I can't depend on him. Now, boys, you are two of my best men, and there is a cool hundred dollars ready for you when you bring me Velvet Vane's scalp, double that if you bring him here alive."

"We understand, boss," said Bowie Sam, "an' you may bet we'll scoop ther pot. Eh, Rube?"

"You've sed enuff fer both o' us," hoarsely muttered Rube.

"That's all, boys," and the chief waved his hand.

Without a word his two tools left the chamber.

Dashing Dave completed his smoke, then lay down upon the rude couch and fell asleep. It could not be that his conscience was much troubled, for he slept as peacefully as an infant.

While he slept the hours crept on and another day came, but no ray of light penetrated the mountain cavern to tell were it day or night.

When the outlaw awoke he first ordered his own breakfast, then directed that food be sent the two prisoners.

After partaking of his breakfast, the outlaw chief made his way to the first cell, in a much better mood than usual. Indeed, he felt that things were working well for him, and he asked no more than that.

He found Isabella looking somewhat haggard and wild-eyed after spending a night in the dismal cavern.

"You are looking pale, my dearie," he said, unlocking the iron door and entering. "Don't get in a fit and worry yourself sick. I should dislike to woo a sick female, even though she were the handsomest one I knew."

The deep look of scorn upon the girl's face was the only reply.

There was a light in the cell. Though he had left the boy in utter darkness, he was not harsh enough to deprive his fair prisoner of such a boon.

"Sit down, dear girl, sit down," said the Double Face, as she stood confronting him. "I have come to have a little talk with you. Perhaps we can come to an understanding now."

"If you have come here to repeat the proposal you made to me some time ago, you have my answer. You need not repeat your insulting words."

Dashing Dave laughed lightly.

"I admire your spunk, my dearie," he retorted, easily; "but 'tis plain your judgment is poor. I offer you a chance to marry a not uncommonly man, and roll in wealth forever after. You can have but poor reasons for throwing aside, or attempting to throw aside, the golden opportunity."

"Sir, I asked you not to repeat your words, but a second time you have insulted me by doing so!"

"Now don't get on your high hoss!" in a mocking, half-laughing tone. "If you do you will surely receive a mighty unpleasant fall. You are in my power, and must eventually submit and come to my terms. I'm not going to press you too hard at first, but mark you—"

"I would have you know, sir," the girl broke in, hotly, "that I have friends who will leave no stone unturned, but they will find and rescue me."

Her words aroused the outlaw. A fierce light came into his eyes, as he said, in savage tones:

"If you have friends, they had better steer clear of Dashing Dave. Look here, my lady, I would have you know you are as far away from your friends' rescuing hands as though this cave were at the bottom of the sea. It would be the worse for them should they bother me. The chances are that they would be summarily disposed of. Perhaps they would be taken prisoners, and then, my lady, if you did not come to terms right soon, they would surely feel a gentle touch of my wrath. Do you comprehend?"

She looked dazed and subdued.

"I will speak plainer," continued the outlaw. "Should your friends, in their search for you, be taken prisoners, upon their heads would be visited punishment for your obstinacy. If you still refuse to accede to my honest demand, they should be returned until the curses they would heap upon your head would be enough to sink you to the very bottom of the bottomless pit!"

She cowered before him now, with the marks of dread and fear plainly showing upon her woe-begone face. His fierce, heartless words fell like heavy blows upon her unprotected head.

The outlaw laughed as he saw this effect. He resolved to cow her completely.

"I do not wish to perform such an unpleasant job, but I may be forced to do so. I have hoped to succeed by measures less harsh, but succeed I will, by any means."

She burst into tears and flung herself upon her knees before him, holding out her hands pleadingly.

"Oh, sir, have mercy! have mercy!" she sobbed. "My friends have money; they will part with every dollar if you will set me free. Have mercy! have mercy!"

"Money—bah! What care I for money!" he cried. "It is not money I want; it is you—your own precious self! Money—I have hoards of it!"

"I will not press you for an answer now. I will give you time. Think well of it—think what must follow if you refuse. Do not forget what I have said, and when I think you have had sufficient time, I will return for an answer."

A moment later he was gone, and she was alone in that lonely, rocky cell—alone to think with burning brain and aching heart—alone!

While playing the part of Colonel Allen, Dashing Dave had more than half suspected that there was some secret friendship, if not more than that, between the Song Queen and Simon Heath. Now that she had spoken of friends who would make desperate attempts to rescue her, he at once came to the conclusion that she referred to Heath.

Da hing Dave chuckled softly as he slowly walked along the echoing cavern corridor. He was well satisfied with the result of the interview.

"I have a plan whereby she can be forced into submission without harming her fair self," he muttered, gleefully. "Oh, things are working finely, finely!"

When he reached his cavern chamber, he again uttered the signal whistle.

"Send in Pious Tim and Quiet Mose," he ordered, as a man appeared in answer to the signal.

A few moments later two men appeared who contrasted strangely with the two ruffians whom he had summoned a short time before. Both were quiet, ordinary appearing men, the last persons liable to be taken for outlaws or desperadoes.

"Tim," said the chief, "you know nearly every one in Bed-Rock?"

"I think I do, sir."

"Do you know Simon Heath?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good enough! Now, Tim, my lad, I have a little job for you and Mose. You are to go into Bed-Rock and find Simon Heath. While in his hearing, let drop words to the effect that you think you could find Dashing Dave's retreat. He has an interest to know where my stronghold lies, and if you say just enough, and do not overdo it and arouse his suspicions, you will have him eager to learn what you know. Then comes the most difficult part of your work. You must decoy him where, with Mose's assistance, you can take him prisoner. It will be a difficult job, for he may suspect a trap."

"Trust me an' Mose, sir. We can play the little game to win."

"I think so, or I would not trust it in your hands. When you have him prisoner, bring him here; and, Tim, take every precaution that he does not see a rod of the road over which he comes. Bind and blindfold him—gag him, too, if necessary. You understand. I leave everything in your hands."

With a wave of his hand he dismissed them.

"I wish all the band were reliable as those two men," he muttered, when they had disappeared. "I fear Pistol Rube and Bowie Sam will fail in their mission. Velvet Vane, as he now calls himself, is a desperate man. They will only succeed by taking him at a great disadvantage."

He started up at the sound of heavy feet tramping along the passage. Three men stood before him, and the voice of Pistol Rube cried:

"Got him, boss! Kitched yer bird fu'st pop, an' hayre he is!"

A fierce cry of savage delight broke from the Double Face, as he saw Pistol Rube and Bowie Sam with a third man, who was a prisoner.

The last was the man in velvet!

CHAPTER XII.

THROUGH THE WALL.

"Whoop!" cried Dashing Dave, as his eyes rested on the Sport. "Can it be possible? Is this the traitor who betrayed me?"

"I reckon it are, boss," declared Pistol Rube, with an ugly grin as he noted the chief's pleasure. "Kinder glad ter see him, I take it."

"At last, you see, I have you in my hands," hissed Dashing Dave. "Now you shall receive the proper reward for your treachery. You are doomed, and all the pistols in Bed-Rock cannot save you!"

The man in velvet made no reply, but gazed scornfully and defiantly at the outlaws. His hands were bound behind him, and he was still bleeding from wounds on his head.

"How did you succeed in capturing him?" asked the chief, evidently somewhat puzzled concerning this part of the affair. "You must have made a lucky stroke."

"We did that same, boss," replied Rube. "We didn't hev ter go far ter find him, either. That thar nose o' his must be sharp on the scent, fer we run plumb ag'in' him on this very mountain, an' I'll bet my hat ag'in' er forty-rod lot in Bed-Rock that he was s'archin' fer this same cave."

"Well, he has found it, and he shall never leave it alive! You shall be well paid for this job, my lads. But how did you manage to rake him in?"

"Waal, ye see, boss, we were strikin' out for Bed-Rock w'en we see'd suthin' movin' way down ther mountain. We kept sly an' watched. Purty soon we see'd 'twas er man afoot, comin' up ther trail what we don't most gener'ally use. He was follerin' it true as er loun' on the scent. We at once decided 'twarn't one o' ther band, an' so we jist laid ourselves in ambush fer him. W'en he cums up an' we see'd as how it was the velvet dandy, ye c'u'd 'a' knock-ed us down wi' a feather!"

"Ye c'u'd that, and not haff tried," put in Bowie Sam.

"Soon's I c'u'd get my balance, I pulled er pop, an' takin' stiddy aim, let fly. I shot tu kill, bet yer boots! but my narves war jist a trifle unstiddy. He went down, an' we leaped fer him. Ther blamed galoot was only stunned, an' he war climbin' up w'en Sam lit outter his back wi' both feet. At the same time I let him hev with er big rock I hed picked up. That downed him, but blamed ef I didn't hev to let 'im hev ernuther onto ther cokernut afore we c'u'd truss 'im up. We boun' 'im han' an' foot, an' sacked him till we got him inter ther cave; then we cut his feet free an' made him walk. That's ther way we roped 'im in, boss."

"You did well, boys, and shall have every cent I promised you for the job. As for the traitor, I'll see that his punishment is of a nature that he will enjoy."

A scornful smile curled the Diamond Sport's lip, but he deigned no reply.

"You cur!" fiercely cried Dashing Dave. "You dastardly traitor! what have you to say for yourself?"

"Not a word," Double Face replied, quietly. "A man who allows a couple of ruffians, like these of yours, to wring in a cold deal on him had better remain silent."

"You have no excuse to make for your treachery?" sneered the outlaw.

"Nary. I joined your gang thinking them a jolly set, who relieved only people incumbered with an over-supply of wealth. When I found them to be a set of cut-throats, who preyed on the weak and helpless, I deserted. I'm not that kind of a man."

"And you released from my hands a prisoner whom I prized more than gold, you traitorous dog! Even then you would not have escaped had you not led me on a false trail."

"Hold your temper, David! It is true that you pressed us hard. I was forced to leave the girl in hiding while I led you on a false scent. Although I fooled you and your bloodhounds, I lost all trace of the prize which I admired and you coveted."

"And now you are a prisoner in my hands, and the prize is within this very cavern. Ha! ha!"—sneeringly. "Your plans have all miscarried. You are doomed to death, and the prize shall become my wife."

"There's many a slip, David," retorted the Diamond Sport, calmly. "The game is not yet played to the end."

"But I hold the winning cards!" cried the outlaw, triumphantly. "I cannot fail now. Death to you, success to me!"

Then turning to his tools:

"Away with him to the second prison cell!"

They led the man in velvet away, who, knowing it was folly to resist, walked along without making an attempt to do so.

They led him past the cell in which Isabella was confined. A light was burning in the cell, and through the grating Vane caught a glimpse of the girl. His heart gave a wild leap as he saw her.

A few feet beyond the first cell, they halted before the massive door of another. This door was unlocked and the Diamond Sport thrust in, Bowie Sam cutting the bonds that held his hands behind his back as Pistol Rube thrust him forward.

Then the huge door clanged behind him.

Velvet Vane found himself alone in the dismal cell, listening to the retreating footsteps of the two ruffians.

"Well," he said, drawing a long breath, "I've been gone, we said and done it now, and no mistake. Vane, you are in a mighty tight box! Things look blue, but I don't propose to lay down and wait for the final round-up. First, I will examine this hole as well as I can in the darkness."

He at once began feeling cautiously around the walls. He moved with great care, for he knew not what pitfalls lay before him. It took him some time to examine the cell, and when he had done so, he calculated that it was much larger than it was in truth. He could form no true estimation in the blank darkness. The walls of the cell were rough and uneven, and at one side his hands unloosed a rock that fell heavily upon the floor.

"I wish I had a light," he muttered. "I would like to examine this hole. I don't imagine there is any way to escape, but I would like to see."

He leaned against the iron bars of the huge door and peered out into the passage. He saw a very dim light that he knew shone from the cell of Isabella.

While leaning there a thought struck him that caused him to again carefully examine the wall of rocks and earth that divided the two cells. He did so carefully, running his hand over nearly all the wall surface within reach. As he was doing this, a cry of surprise and pleasure suddenly broke from his lips.

His eye caught the gleam of a tiny ray of light that shone through the rocky wall! He at once knew that it came from the adjoining cell.

Then he realized that it was much to his advantage that he had no light. Otherwise he might not have discovered the minute break in the wall.

With his fingers he at once began removing the loose earth and stones near where he saw the ray of light. Isabella had moved the light so that it now shone out broadly into the passage. A faint glow was reflected into Vane's cell. Besides this his eyes had become accustomed to the darkness, and he could now see quite well.

Eagerly he worked, tearing out the rocks and earth. It was a difficult job, and he progressed slowly.

While Vane is at work on the wall, we will turn our attention for a short time to another part of the cavern.

Dashing Dave was in high glee, but there was that in store for him that would make him feel even better.

Less than two hours after the man in velvet was brought into the cavern, Pious Tim and Quiet Mose appeared, conducting two prisoners, who proved to be Heath and Giles.

The Double Face chief uttered a cry of astonishment as he saw the prisoners.

"What does this mean, boys? You made quick work."

"We found them two-thirds the way here," explained Pious Tim.

"Coming to meet us," laughed Quiet Mose.

"An' we quietly took them prisoners of war, trussed them up, put er blindfold over their eyes an' brought them in," Tim concluded.

"That was a good job easily done, my lads. But this fellow here"—indicating Giles—"is an unnecessary commodity."

"Well, he just begged to be brought along, an' we wasn't hard-hearted enough to refuse," laughed Tim.

Heath had been staring at the outlaw chief in amazement. He now cried:

"Colonel Allen, you here! What does this mean?"

The Double Face laughed coolly.

"Colonel Allen no longer, my friend. For a time that guise worked well. With my Private Vigilance Committee, the most of whom belonged to my jolly band of road-agents, I played the part of leading citizen quite well for a time. But now things having taken the turn which they have, I no longer need to masquerade as Colonel Allen. That person has forever disappeared, and when perfect success is mine, as it shall be, Dashing Dave shall disappear too."

"You the outlaw Dashing Dave? Impossible!"

"Not a bit of it, my friend. I am Dashing Dave, without doubt."

"Then you are the person we wish to see," said Giles, much cooler than his companion.

"If you are not blind, you have that privilege."

"We understand that you have taken prisoner a friend of ours, Miss Isabella, the Song Queen."

"Though it puzzles me to understand how you obtained your information, I am free to admit it is true," replied the Double Face.

"We wish to obtain her release," Heath put in.

Dashing Dave smiled grimly.

"Undoubtedly."

"We are willing to pay a fair ransom."

"Very well; I will talk with you again. Until then I shall be forced to keep you confined. Take them to the third cell, boys."

Despite protests, Pious Tim and Quiet Mose led the two prisoners away.

"If the boss should take any more prisoners, he would have no place to keep them," said Tim, as they thrust Heath and Giles into the third and last cell, and observed that the other two were occupied. "Long John said that there is a fellow in the Dungeon."

"Yes; he's got his hand full," observed Mose.

Vane observed the two prisoners as they were led by the cell where he was confined, and a low whistle of astonishment escaped him. He ceased work on the wall till the two captors were gone.

"Well, well!" muttered the Sport. "Those two chaps have stepped in it, sure. David is scooping them in at a great rate. Wonder if they have tumbled to his double-face business?"

He again resumed work on the wall, upon which he had already made quite an impression. Steadily and earnestly he worked, resolved to make a hole through which he could speak, if nothing more. A knife would have assisted him greatly, but he had nothing but his bare hands with which to dig away the earth and rocks. The wall was nearly three feet in thickness, and built up with a layer of heavy stones on each side. Between them were filled in earth and smaller stones.

Vane realized that there was some danger of unloosing the whole wall and have it come crashing down upon him, therefore he worked with great care.

A cry of joy escaped him as he finally gave a large rock a push and it fell into the adjoining cell, allowing a broad ray of light to shine through the opening thus made.

Isabella had heard him at work upon the wall,

and as soon as the opening was made, her soft, musical voice asked:

"Who is there?"

"A friend—one who will endeavor to rescue you. If I can make this opening large enough, I will come in."

He again began work on the wall, and soon had an opening large enough to crawl through. He at once did so.

Within the cell he turned toward the girl. She stood before him in all her beauty, an appealing light in her eyes. Vane's heart was wildly throbbing.

"I have found you at last!" he cried.

She sprang toward him, clasping him around the neck.

"Oh, you will save me!" she sobbed, clinging to him. "I know you will! Save me! Take me away from this inhuman wretch!"

"I will rescue you or die in the attempt!" cried the Diamond Sport clasping her to his breast. "Once I rescued you from the outlaw's clutches; I will do so again."

Her face was half-upturned to him. He bent forward intending to kiss the forehead, when the sound of advancing footsteps smote upon his ear.

"Hark!" he whispered. "Out with the light! Some one is coming!"

CHAPTER XIII.

A DESPERATE RACE FOR LIFE.

QUICK to comprehend the situation, Isabella sprang forward and put out the light.

The man in velvet sprang into a corner near the cell door. He crouched low down, his hand resting on a loose stone as he did so.

The sound of advancing footsteps came nearer and nearer. A wild hope filled the Sport's breast as he heard the steps pause before Isabella's cell and saw the dull ray of a light shine through the grating.

A key rattled in the lock, and the rusty bolt left its socket.

Slowly the door swung open, and a man entered, bearing a light and a tray holding food for the prisoner.

"Hullo! hullo hayre! Left without a light? That's a confounded—"

He said no more, for at this moment, with a panther-like spring, the Diamond Sport leaped upon him. Down came the stone upon the man's head, and without even a groan he sunk to the rocky floor.

The light went out, and all was midnight darkness in the cell.

A moment later the Sport lighted a match, which spluttered and flashed, burning blue in the darkness.

"Where is the lamp?" asked Vane.

"Here," came the reply in the faint tones of the girl.

He groped around until he found and lighted the oil lamp.

"Now, my dear girl," said the Sport, "we must make a desperate attempt to escape from this hole. The way is opened."

"Oh, sir, I fear it will be impossible to escape even now," answered Isabella, faintly.

"Well, we must try. We cannot take the lamp, for it might betray us. We will lock this fellow in, though I don't imagine he will bother us for a while."

"Oh! have you killed him?" cried the prisoner, as Vane dragged the unconscious man fully into the cell, and taking the revolvers from him, placed them in his own pockets.

"No; only put him to sleep for a while. Ah! here I have the keys. The one to this cell is in the lock. Now come here and stand by the door while I put the light out. If any one should pass this cell before this fellow recovers, I don't want them to look in and see how the land lays."

The light was extinguished. Making his way out of the cell, the man in velvet locked the door behind him, putting the keys in his pocket. Then, taking the girl's hand, he started along the passage, but did not go far before he branched off into a passage that led into the very heart of the mountain instead of out to the open air.

Occasionally he lit a match and glanced around, then on they went, creeping slowly and cautiously along the dark halls of the dismal cavern.

Vane felt the girl's hand trembling as though the strain upon her nerves was too much for her. He placed his left arm about her waist, and with his right hand felt his way slowly along.

Occasionally he would whisper words of comfort to her. She clung to him, trusting all to his courage and strength.

They knew not how long they struggled and stumbled on through the darkness—it seemed hours. But suddenly, they both stopped, and with bated breaths, listened intently.

From far away through the rocky aisle they heard a faint cry. A moment later a series of excited shouts came faintly to their ears.

The young man clasped the girl closer to him as he again pushed hastily forward.

"The bloodhounds are giving tongue," he said. "They have discovered our game, and will soon be hot on our trail."

The girl nearly swooned in her terror. The strange occurrences she had passed through and the flight through the dark recesses of the outlaws' den had nearly unnerved her.

"Bear up, little one! bear up!" softly encouraged the rescuer, supporting her drooping form on his arm. "Courage! I will save you, or die in the attempt!"

They hurried onward through the darkness. At irregular intervals they heard the cries behind them, but the sounds came no nearer. Finally the cries ceased, but the Sport was not to be deceived by this silence. He pushed on the harder, for he knew that a rigid search was being made. He knew that Dashing Dave would examine every foot of the cavern until they were found.

Vane would have given much, then, could he have seen a glimpse of daylight before him. Vainly he strained his eyes, hoping to see the mouth of that underground rendezvous.

It was but a short time after hearing those fierce cries that the Sport, while looking over his shoulder, saw a gleaming light away in the rear. He set his teeth hard, with a wild, desperate determination never to be taken alive.

Supporting the girl he hurried her on; but rapidly the lights gained on them. He again looked back to see several men bearing torches come rushing down toward them.

Fierce cries broke from the pursuers' lips as they caught sight of the fugitives.

The light of the torches now shone ahead of the Sport and girl. Suddenly the passage broadened into a huge chamber. The sharp eyes of the man in velvet, who was eagerly looking for a place to "stand off" the pursuers, saw at one side of this chamber a pile of bowlders at least ten feet high, heaped against the wall.

He at once decided upon a plan of action. "Up! up!" he cried to the girl, as they began scrambling up the face of the rock-pile. "It's our only chance! Up! up!"

Bruised, panting, desperate, they reached the top of the rock-heap and there crouched behind a large bowlder.

"Back!" cried the daring Sport, as their pursuers came yelling up to the foot of the rocky retreat. "Back, you devils! or I'll fill you full of lead!"

"After him! At him!" shouted Dashing Dave, who was with the pursuers. "He is unarmed. At him!"

They attempted to scale the rock-pile, but they were destined to meet with a surprise. In his hands Vane held the weapons he had taken from the outlaw whom he had left unconscious in the cell. They spoke once, twice! and two outlaws fell dead at the foot of the rocky refuge.

Again the Sport's voice was heard crying: "Back, you wolves—back! Every man that attempts to climb eats lead! You hear me!"

Almost as one man the rest of the pursuers made a rush for refuge behind the various bowlders that lay around upon the floor of the chamber.

A derisive, mocking laugh burst from the Diamond Sport's lips.

"Hide, you cowards!" he cried. "You may escape my bullets, but you cannot escape the ropes that are waiting for your necks."

It was plain that the man in velvet had the "deadwood" on the outlaws. His pursuers bore torches, the light of which illuminated the chamber and made them conspicuous targets as soon as they exposed themselves. Crouching behind the rocks in deep shadow ten feet above them, Vane held his weapons ready for instant use.

"Surrender, you traitor! Surrender," cried the chief, "or it will be worse for you!"

A mocking laugh was the answer. "Surrender?—never!" he answered, defiantly. "Come and take me if you want me! I give you fair warning, David, not to expose yourself to my view. I'll salt you the minute I set eyes on you!"

"Bah! You're a coward who hides himself behind a woman's petticoats!" retorted the outlaw. "If you were alone, we'd soon make it too hot for you."

"Don't mind the lady," laughed the Sport. "She is where your bullets cannot harm her in the least. Pop away, my brave lads. I'll wager something there is not one who dares expose himself enough to pull trigger."

Barely had he ceased speaking when one of

the brigands peered out from his place of refuge, hoping to catch a snap shot at the Sport; but Vane was too alert to be caught. He fired, and the report of his revolver was followed by a howl of pain, as the fellow sprang to his feet, with his right wrist shattered by the bullet. Although for the space of nearly a minute the man was in full view, Vane made no attempt to take his life.

"One man laid up for repairs," he laughed, mockingly. "Next!"

For a time the outlaws were plainly at fault, but as the Sport watched and waited for the next move the torches were suddenly extinguished.

"Hal! That's their game, is it," gritted the man in velvet. "Well, let them come!"

He braced himself, with his fingers touching the triggers, waiting for the expected onset. But it did not come.

After a short time, one by one, the torches were again relighted. Vane was puzzled by this move. He strongly suspected some trick, yet could not imagine what it could be.

Suddenly a torch was hurled through the air, and fell near the bowlder behind which the Sport was crouching. It nearly died out, but soon it began to flame up. Then Vane realized that, if it was not at once extinguished his place of retreat would soon be in a broad glare of light.

With a cat-like spring he was upon the torch, but ere he could stamp out the flames a single pistol-shot rung through the cave, and without a cry he fell flat upon the burning torch!

Wild cries of delight were uttered by the outlaws, as they sprung from their places of refuge and dashed toward the rocky retreat. As they came scrambling up the rocks the tall form of the Diamond Sport arose, and shot after shot echoed through the cave as he poured a leaden shower among them.

Astonished by the loud reports, some slain and many wounded, the outlaws quickly fell back behind convenient rocks, while, unharmed, the daring man crouched in his place of retreat, the victor.

"Another round for yours truly!" cried the Sport. "Walk up, gentlemen; walk up, and keep the fun going. The Diamond Sport is always at home!"

But the brigands had learned a dread lesson. Six of their men were dead, and two of the remaining five were wounded. A pile of gold as high as Pike's Peak would not have tempted them to make another dash for the rock behind which crouched their desperate foe.

"Are you hurt, sir?" asked Isabella, her anxiety overpowering her terror.

"Not a scratch," replied the Sport; but in a low whisper he added: "I'm mighty hard up for lead. There are but two bullets left in these revolvers."

For awhile the mad ruffians made no move. Then another torch came whirling through the air. It lodged half-way up the rocky incline, but where it did no damage.

An amused laugh came from the Sport. "They're wasting time if they think to succeed in that way," he muttered. "I fancy I can hold them at bay here till they starve me out."

Another torch hurled at the rocky fortress lodged near the top. As it flamed up, Vane picked up a stone and hurled it at the flaming pine. The stone struck it, but did not put out the flames. As the Sport picked up another stone for a second shot, another torch struck near the first.

The light of the two torches was sufficient to illuminate the daring fellow's place of refuge, but the bowlder behind which he crouched protected him from the eyes of the outlaws.

He hurled the second stone at the torches. It struck one of them, knocking it off the rock upon which it rested. The next instant a snake-like coil suddenly encircled the Sport's arms, pinning them to his sides, as he was jerked off his feet, and slowly swinging round, held suspended in the air!

CHAPTER XIV.

INTO THE SERPENTS' DEN.

A YELL of delight pealed from Dashing Dave's lips as he saw his enemy suspended in the air, a helpless prisoner.

"Hold him, Gid!" he shouted to the lassowhrower, whose form could be faintly seen upon a ledge twenty feet above the Sport's head. "Hold him there, my lad! We will attend to him as soon as possible."

For the third time the outlaws clambered up the rock-pile, but this time they were not re-

pulsed by the murderous fire they had before met.

But the man in velvet was not yet beyond doing harm.

When he picked up the stones to throw at the burning torches, he thrust one revolver into his pocket, still holding the other in his left hand. When the coil encircled him, pinning his arms to his sides and lifting him off his feet, he held fast to the weapon.

As he slowly whirled round at the end of the lasso, one of the outlaws came beneath him. The man's face was upturned to the Dandy Sport, and the revolver for a moment pointed straight down at him. Then came a flash, a report. With a scream of mortal agony the outlaw grasping at his throat plunged headlong from the rock-pile.

As one man the three outlaws started back, dreading another shot.

"A million curses!" shrieked Dashing Dave. "Another good boy gone! Lower away on that devil, Gid, and we'll soon truss him up so he'll do no more damage."

The Sport was lowered until his feet just cleared the ground, but even then he was not harmless. As the outlaws sprung forward to bind him, Vane's foot suddenly shot out, taking one of them fair in the face. The fellow did not bring up until he reached the bottom of the rock-pile, landing upon his dead companion.

Dashing Dave and his single companion sprung forward and seized the invincible Sport. They had him nearly bound when their unfortunate companion once more climbed the rocks, spitting out teeth and curses at the same time.

"We have you now, you devil!" gritted the chief. "You shall suffer for this work, curse you!"

"Ruffled your temper a little, have I, Double Face David?" asked the Sport, coolly. "Never mind; you can have lots of fun with me now."

The chief made no reply. "Lower away, Gid," he cried, to the man above. "We have him safe."

The Sport was lowered down upon the rocks. "Ab, you tiger!" hissed Dashing Dave, as his foe lay helpless at his feet. "We have you, at last, in the toils!"

"Well, you have," replied Vane, quietly. "You played a real nice little trick on me. I wondered what you extinguished your torches for. I understand it now."

"Yes; we put the lights out while Lasso Gid stole round and gained the ledge above you. It was the only way we could take you; but now you shall pay for the bloody work you have done."

The Double Face ordered his followers to lift the Sport and carry him back along the passage. He then turned to the girl, who was crouching among the rocks, overcome with dread and terror.

"Come, my dear," he said, stooping and lifting her up. "Don't fear; you shall not be harmed. You came near slipping through my fingers, thanks to that traitor—curse him!" he ended, abruptly.

The girl's limbs refused to support her, and he was forced to carry her down the rocks. All hope and strength had deserted her.

Lasso Gid came down from the ledge, and bearing a torch, he lighted the way back along the passage, along which the ruffians made their way with their prisoners, leaving behind them their seven dead companions who would never be buried.

It looked black for the Diamond Sport, but he was not one to give up until the end had indeed come.

Back near the cell from which he had escaped, the prisoner was placed on the rocky floor.

"We won't put him in there again," declared Dave. "This night's work has earned him a different cell."

"You had better put me in a safer one than this," suggested Vane. "That wall was a perfect piece of botch-work. A sick kitten could dig through it."

"Oh, we'll put you where you'll be safe, fast enough," was the savage retort. "Seven as good boys as ever drew breath lie dead back there—your work! You may be sure we shall not let you slip through our fingers, you sleek tiger!"

A savage growl came from the other. "As for this sweet lady, whom you once stole from me, and made a second attempt to do so, she shall become my wife."

"Never, you inhuman monster—never!" cried the girl, her old defiant spirit returning. "I will die first!"

"Very easily said," laughed the outlaw; "but not so easily accomplished. I think too much

of you, my dear, to allow you to shuffle off this mortal coil. You shall surely become my wife."

"Again I say *never!* Unhand me, you villain! Your touch is contaminating!"

She freed herself from his grasp, and stood confronting him, her eyes flashing with indignation and detestation.

"Now don't try any foolish tricks, my dear," warned the Double Face. "It will be better for you. I am in no pleasant mood, and it will be well not to anger me further. Enough is a feast."

A contemptuous laugh came from the Sport.

"Don't ruffle up his sweet temper," he added mockingly. "He is apt to become desperate, if riled. Bah! he is a cowardly cur!"

"Have a care, you devil!" cried the outlaw fiercely. "Bridle your tongue, or I swear by Heaven I'll cut it out!"

"Cut—nothing!" sneered the helpless Sport. "You're a cut-throat, a sneaking murderer, and a base coward! You're a—"

"Curse you! I'll cut your heart out!" gritted Dave, whipping out a knife and springing upon his taunting foe. He seized the Sport by the throat and held the gleaming blade quivering before his very eyes. It seemed for a moment that he was about to strike, but Vane never flinched. He gazed into the outlaw's face, a mocking smile still on his lips.

With a harsh laugh, Dashing Dave arose from Vane's breast, replacing the knife in his belt.

"You have nerve," he acknowledged; "but I fancy you'll need it before I am through with you."

Turning to the girl, he continued:

"And now, my dear, I repeat: you shall become my wife, and that in less than twenty-four hours. If you will not submit at once, I have the means of forcing you to consent."

"You cannot compel me to marry you," she declared, firmly. "You may torture me, you may kill me, but I will never submit!"

"That remains to be seen," was the reply. "I have a hold on you of which you do not dream. Don't think I mean to injure you. I think too much of my fair prisoner to harm her in the least."

"Very gallant of you, David," sneered the Sport.

Without heeding this taunt, the chief continued:

"If you do not consent to become my wife, friends whom you value dearly shall suffer for your obstinacy—shall be put to the torture, and you shall hear their cries of agony as they suffer."

"Inhuman fiend!" cried the girl. "My friends, if I have any, are beyond your reach." Then, as she realized what a true friend Velvet Vane had been to her, she seemed about to speak again; but the Double Face caught her by the arm and dragged her to the third cell.

"Look there!" cried Dashing Dave, as Lasso Gid held the torch so that the interior of the cell was plainly visible. "I never leave my work undone."

Isabella gave a cry of surprise as she recognized Heath and Giles, who were peering out through the grating.

"I give you a short time to consider," added the scoundrel, as he dragged her back and thrust her into the cell from which the man in velvet had assisted her to escape. "You will be safe here. I hardly fancy that hole in the wall will be of any advantage to you, and you will have no devilish traitor to aid you."

Then he turned to Vane.

"Now, you cur, I will attend to you. You deserve something more than death, and you shall have it. When you die *you shall perish by fire!* But, I am not ready to send you off yet. You shall have the pleasure of seeing me married to the woman whom you covet. How do you like that picture?"

"Go on with your sport," muttered Vane. "It's your day now, but you'll run to the end of your rope yet, and bring up with your feet dangling in the air, you double-faced villain!"

"One thing is sure—you'll not be there to witness the circus," retorted the outlaw, with a harsh laugh. "While we are waiting for the marriage ceremony you will be placed in a den inhabited by a countless number of serpents! That's pleasant, isn't it?"

"Go on," retorted Vane, grimly. "Why do you spend so much time in talk?"

"The snakes are all harmless," continued Dashing Dave; "but I think you will find them anything but pleasant companions."

He waved his hand, and the outlaws lifted their prisoner and bore him along the passage. They descended a flight of rude stone steps and

entered the long chamber, at one side of which was the dungeon, where Ned Cole, the Boy Avenger, was confined.

As they bore the Sport by the dungeon door the boy peered out and saw them. A low cry came from the lad's lips as he recognized the man in velvet a prisoner. The cry reached Vane's ear, and he turned his eyes in time to see the white face pressed against the iron grating. In turn, the scout uttered a cry of amazement as he recognized his boy partner.

They bore him on across the cavern chamber. Halting before what appeared to be the solid wall they lowered their prisoner to the floor. For a few moments Dashing Dave fumbled along the face of this wall, and then what appeared to be a square section of the solid rock swung outward, revealing a dark opening beyond. It was really a cunningly contrived door, situated about four feet above the cavern floor.

A fiendish chuckle of delight broke from the lips of the Double Face, as he seized a torch and peered down into the opening.

"Lift the traitor up, boys, and let him take a peep at his room-mates," ordered the chief.

They lifted the Sport so that he was enabled to look into the opening. The light of the torch showed him a small, dark chamber, the rocky floor of which was on a level with the outer chamber. Alarmed by the sudden light, a hundred hissing serpents were crawling and squirming around over the floor.

"In with the imp!" shouted Dashing Dave.

The next moment Velvet Vane was thrust into the serpents' den.

CHAPTER XV.

THE PARSON AND THE RED-HEAD SHOW THEIR HANDS.

BARELY had the man in velvet struck the rocky floor of the serpents' den when the sounds of revolver-shots and wild cries came to his ears.

Then he heard a voice crying:

"Hold the light, partner!"

Before he could imagine what had happened, Vane felt himself seized and dragged forth from the den. Then a quick hand cut his bonds and stood him upon his feet.

"All right, my posey!" exclaimed a hearty, good-natured voice that sounded familiar. "Just a little circus. Lots of sport, but no harm done!"

By the light of a fast-expiring torch that lay on the floor, and the rays of a dark-lantern held in the speaker's hand, to his intense astonishment the Sport saw before him Parson Grimes and the red-headed man!

Lying on the cavern floor, in the various positions in which they had fallen when stricken down by the deadly bullets, were the four outlaws. Swift and sure, sudden retribution had overtaken them all—a just vengeance—a righteous retribution.

The Sport was still gazing around in a dazed manner, when the voice of Parson Grimes broke in:

"We were just in time, my friend. You are saved, and these inhuman wretches have met their just deserts."

There was none of the solemn, long-drawn religious tone in his voice now. Indeed, it sounded very firm and business-like.

"But—but I don't understand—" faltered the Sport, looking inquiringly from one to the other of the two men.

"Easiest thing in the world, friend," laughed the red-headed man. "We happened to be in this chamber when the outlaws brought you here. As soon as you were out of the way of our bullets, it was an easy thing to dispose of the whole gang."

"But I left you at the foot of the mountain. How came you here?"

"I reckon these long legs of mine had considerable to do with my getting here," replied the parson. "That blamed little mule wouldn't climb for cold mutton."

"You see," put in the red-head, "when you failed to return and we got tired of waiting, we just followed in your tracks. As a result, here we are."

"I begin to perceive," said the Sport. "You have both been acting—"

"Look out, friend!" cried the parson, excitedly. At the same time he sprang forward, and with a swift kick sent a revolver flying from the hand of Dashing Dave, who had raised himself on one elbow, and was endeavoring to get a shot at the Sport.

"None of that, you double-faced villain!" hissed the parson, as he stood over the outlaw chief, with revolver leveled. "Try that on

again, and I'll send you to your master, the Devil!"

"And I reckon he'd find a mighty hot corner for you," put in the red-headed man.

"Ah! Shoot, you impostor!" gasped the outlaw, as he sunk back. "Dashing Dave will die as he has lived—game to the end!"

"Don't peg out now, David," put in the red-headed man. "There is a rope waiting for you, and it will be money in my pocket if I can take you to it."

"You shot too straight," replied the outlaw. "If you are—an officer—you have baffled yourself, for—I have received a—death—wound."

He sunk gasping upon the rocks and in less than ten minutes Colonel Allen, Dashing Dave, the Outlaw Chief, had gone to his final judgment.

"That throws *him* out of the game," said the red-headed man, soberly, "and it throws me out of the reward. He offered a reward for his own capture, dead or alive, when he was playing a double game in Bed-Rock. But of course that was only a blind."

"Then you are, in truth, an officer?" asked Vane.

"Yes," was the reply, "we are both detectives. Although on very different lays, for a time our trails ran near together and we joined hands. My trail ends here."

"And mine has ended in a hole in the air, so to speak, figuratively," said the other. "I was searching for a young woman, who, by the death of her father, has fallen heir to a fine property. I have found out that she was with a wagon-train that was attacked and destroyed by Indians, not one of the emigrants escaping. Thus my search proves a fruitless one."

"Well, we have those who are prisoners in this infernal den to liberate," reminded the man in velvet, "and that done we had better get out of this beastly place as soon as possible."

"Not much of a job that," observed Basil Benton, who has been known in these pages as "the d-headed man." "All we need to do is walk out."

"But there are guards."

"They are disposed of," solemnly assured the parson, "whose true name was Enos Keen, and known in 'the States' as King Keen one of the most famous sleuths on Pinkerton's force."

"Well, now to liberate the prisoners," and Vane seized the expiring torch and swung it around his head till it was fanned into a blaze. "Come on!"

They soon made their way to the Dungeon, and found the boy still peering through the iron grating.

In his pocket Vane still had the keys which he had taken from the lock to the door of Isabella's cell when making that desperate attempt to escape. He drew them forth, and tried them one by one till he found one that fitted the lock, and the Dungeon door swung open.

"You have come, at last!" exclaimed the boy, faintly but joyfully, "I knew you would!"

Tenderly the Sport put his arm about his boy pard and led him forth from the cell. The lad's head rested against the Sport's shoulder, and Vane's strong arm supported his drooping form.

"I have come," murmured the Sport, softly; "I have found you, thank Heaven! I made a great mistake, a short time ago; but it is all right, now that I have found you."

"I hoped and prayed that you might come. I felt that you would."

"Your trail of vengeance is ended. Dashing Dave is dead, and you can now throw off this disguise."

"Ah, yes; Annie Maines shall live again."

"What's that?" shouted King Keen. "Annie Maines did you say? What do you mean?"

A few words explained all.

The supposed boy was indeed Annie Maines. She and her husband, the only ones who survived the attack on the Fairgrave emigrant-train, were taken prisoners by Dashing Dave. The outlaw chief fell in love with his fair captive, as also did his lieutenant, then known as Reckless Rob. The outlaw chief put Annie Maines's husband out of his way by shooting him for trying to escape. But, ere he could force the girl-widow to marry him, his lieutenant deserted, taking the prisoner with him. The outlaws followed close after them, like a pack of bloodhounds on the scent. In order to escape, the deserter was forced to secrete his charge in a safe hiding-place, while he led the pursuers far away on a false scent. The plan worked, but the fugitives were separated, for when Reckless Rob returned to the hiding-place, Annie Maines was gone. Becoming alarmed during his absence, and fearing

at he would not return, she had set out to find the nearest settlement, which, fortunately, she reached in safety.

Reckless Rob became known as Velvet Vane. He wandered here and there searching for Annie Maines, but, until he met "Ned Cole, the Boy Avenger," his search was fruitless. Disguised as a boy, the girl-widow was seeking revenge for the wrongs done her by the outlaw. Vane penetrated the disguise, and recognized the one for whom he was searching. This explains why he suddenly changed his mind and joined the apparent boy in his fight against Dashing Dave. Isabella, the Song Queen, was almost the counterpart of Annie Maines, thus it came about that the Sport mistook her for his "partner." Dashing Dave, too, was deceived by the resemblance, as we have seen.

In a few words King Keen told Annie Maines of her father's death and the fact that he had left her all his wealth.

"Come, friends, let's be getting out of here," said Basil Benton. "I'd rather be happy in the sweet air than in this detestable hole."

On their way out of the cavern Vane liberated the other prisoners.

"Look here, you two rascals!" said King Keen to Heath and Giles; "your little game is up. The real heiress is found, so you may as well slide. Your presence in Bed Rock will make you sick, so *git* while you can."

Not a word did either of the two schemers reply; they were only too glad to be able to *git*.

Leaving the cavern, the party set out for Bed Rock.

When the people of Bed-Rock learned of the part Basil Benton had taken in the "wiping-out" of Dashing Dave, they not only tendered him their thanks, but raised a good-sized purse and gave it to him, while King Keen received the reward offered for the recovery of the heiress.

The plotters, Heath and Giles, of course were forced to give up their little scheme, much to Isabella's satisfaction. They turned their attention to other fields for the exercise of their ingenuity; and, as for Roarin' Bob, he was hanged for horse-stealing in less than a month.

And the Diamond Sport?

He abandoned his wild life among the mines and went East. Yes, he married the heiress, and became one of the most prosperous business men in an Eastern city; and no one knowing the popular Vernon Vane—as was really his name—would ever dream that he had been, in his reckless, younger years, Velvet Vane, the Diamond Sport.

THE END.

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